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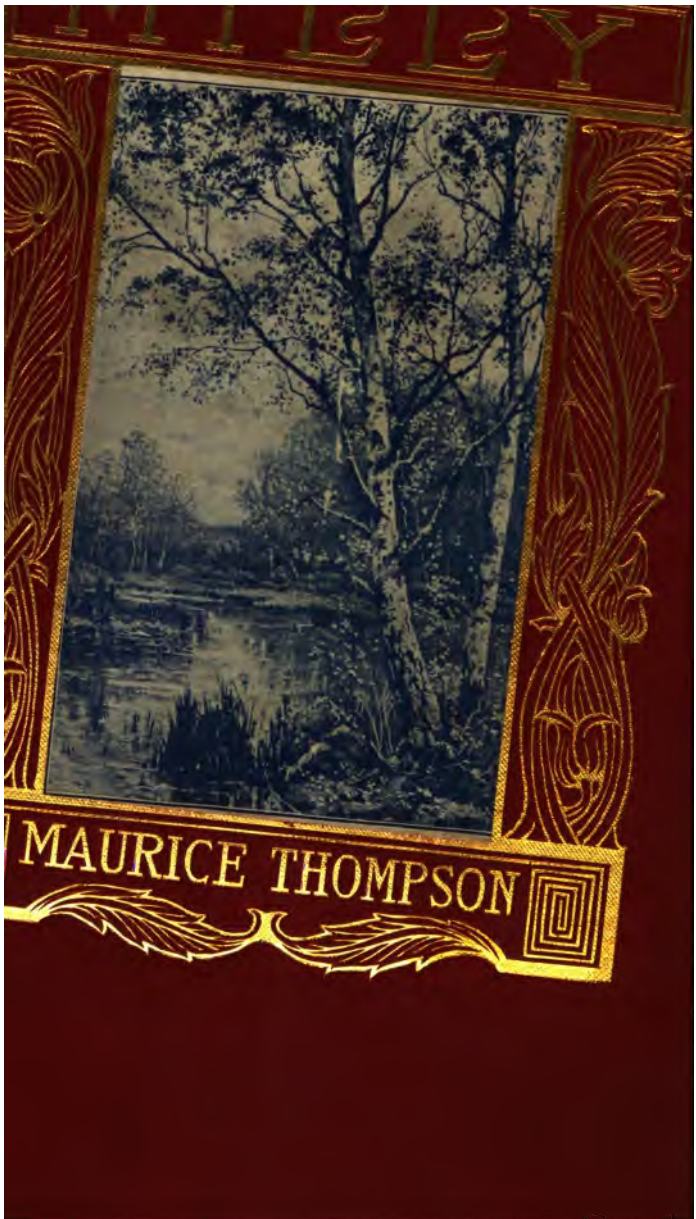

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MILLY:

At Love's Extremes

A Romance of the Southland

By MAURICE THOMPSON

Author of "Alice of Old Vincennes"

ILLUSTRATED

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Milly: At Love's Extremes

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MILLY:
AT LOVE'S EXTREMES

CHAPTER I.

MOUNTAIN DEW.

A MAN stood on the jutting shoulder of a mountain overlooking a long, narrow valley, whose scattering houses and irregular farm-plats, seen through the clear air of that high region, appeared scarcely a gunshot distant, when in fact they were miles away. It was early morning; the sun had barely cleared the highest peaks in the east, and the landscape, albeit a mid-winter one, was wonderfully rich in colors. On the oak trees the leaves still clung in heavy brown, green and russet masses; the hickory forests, though leafless, made bits of tender gray along the lower valley-slopes, whilst high up toward the mountain tops, the billowy wilderness of pines, cedars and chestnut trees added their variegated patch-work that gradually rose and shaded off into the blue of distance. In some places where storms, or the needs of man, had removed the oak woods, a dense, frondous mass of

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young pines had leaped up with a greenness full of a soft yellow glow. The sunshine and the wind of the South were flowing over this scene, and there were fragrant odors and balsamic pungency in every wave.

The man, a tall, shapely fellow, was a young Englishman who had lately come to the iron and coal region of Alabama to take charge of extensive manufacturing and mining interests belonging to his family. Just at present, with a true English faith in the value of outdoor sports, he was hunting wild turkeys, or, for that matter, whatever other wild game might chance to let him get within gun-shot of it. He had left his hotel at Birmingham with the first hint of dawn, and had steadily tramped over hills and mountain spurs and through wild ravines and beautiful glades, without a sight of fur or feather. Now he stood on this airy height, flushed with his healthful exercise, a little disappointed and annoyed. But the mountain air of the South has in it a tenderly exhilarating influence which affects the imagination and lulls one into pleasant, though often rather vague dreams. No matter if Edward Moreton was an intensely practical-minded man of affairs, the kind of Englishman who is willing to come to America and superintend iron works and coal mines, he was, nevertheless, not wholly impervious to the poetry—the lulling magnetism of the climate and the scene. For a while he leaned on his gun, a long, heavy double-barreled piece; then he took from his

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pocket a cigarette and match, seated himself on an old gray stone and began smoking. In the midst of the valley below, ran a rivulet, winding through the woods with a silvery shimmer, and out across the farms and past one little mill, on into a deep gorge of the stony hills.

Moreton had not found his surroundings in Birmingham quite satisfactory, notwithstanding the fact that he had fallen in love, after the old time fervid fashion, with a fair young Northern girl living there. The little mining town, cramped between the hills, full of rough folk, raw and new, could not be very attractive to a man who, no matter how practical and matter of fact in his disposition, had studied art and who still nursed the artist's dreams. As he sat there with his blue-gray eyes slowly sweeping the valley, he was not as blithe-looking as a model sportsman should be. His dog, a small brown spaniel, sat down at his feet and eyed him lazily. No sound, save the rustle of the wind in the trees and a dull distant tapping of a woodpecker, was disturbing the broad silence of the forest. The sky was intensely blue. Suddenly a short puff of dampness came from the southwest, followed by a growl of thunder, a thing not usual in winter, even in that latitude. Moreton arose and saw a heavy line of black cloud overhanging some conical peaks far away on the southwestern horizon.

"Come Nat," he said to his dog, "we must be going

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back; a nasty squall is coming. We shall get our jackets wet."

Nat answered with divers canine antics and the two turned away from the valley, the man walking with long firm strides and the dog trotting perfunctorily at his side. Their way led among the flanking spurs and foot-hills of the range, now over great fragmentary bowlders, now through yawning clefts and down winding defiles, sometimes on bare ridges of shale, anon under the dark odorous brushes of the pines. The cloud came after them, sending in advance its gusts of moist, fragrant air. A vast wing reached up to the zenith and a few big drops of rain pattered down. A morning shower in the mountains comes at race-horse speed. The swiftest birds are caught by it. A flock of noisy crows went flapping across the valley, striving in vain to outstrip the slanting flood that fell with a broad, washing roar from that rushing cloud.

"We are in for a soaking, Nat," grumbled Moreton, as he plucked up the collar of his shooting jacket; "a deuced bad outcome for our first day's shooting in America!"

Nat's tail was down and so were his ears. He relished the signs of the weather no more than did his stalwart master. A chilliness was creeping into the air, foretelling how disagreeable the rain was sure to be. The very trees shivered as the sunshine was shut off by the overlapping cloud.

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It was just as the storm was about to break that certain sharp cries peculiar to the wild turkey reached the quick ears of sportsman and dog. The man stopped short and cocked his gun, as the spaniel darted away to a short distance and then began creeping through the low underbrush, as a setter does when about to come to a point. In the next instant four large birds were flushed, breaking from cover at about forty yards, their wings making the woods resound with their loud flapping. Almost at the same moment, the "bang—pang!" of Moreton's gun, fired right and left, went echoing across the valley and battling amongst the hills. A cock and hen were stopped short and fell heavily. The dog sprang forward to lead his master to the game, and then came a blinding downgush of rain with a roar like that of a cyclone.

Moreton with great difficulty got the birds, and, after tying them together by the feet, slung them across his shoulder. This additional load and the hindering force of the rain made his further progress quite laborious. Nat resumed his drooping, mechanical jog-trot at his master's side. The young man leaned over and almost shut his eyes as he pressed on, catching quick breaths as the cold streams trickled down his back. His shooting jacket and trowsers were meant to be impervious to water, but the chilling liquid was dashed by the force of the wind against his neck and thence found its way down to his heels. He

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did not hesitate, under such stress of ill luck, to rush boldly against the door of a low, rambling mountain cabin and demand admission. His knock on the rough planks was heard by the inmates of the place, despite the heavy roar of the rain, and the response was immediate.

"Kem in, kem in," spoke a rather pleasing voice, in the peculiar accent and intonation of the mountaineers of the region, as the door was opened, letting the hunter and his dog in, along with a dash of slanting rain. "Le' me take them birds, strenger, an' ye jest git ther' by the fire. Hit's purty outdacious rainy all of a suddent; purty near drownd a feller." The speaker was a slender, almost slight, man, near fifty years old, flaxen-haired, thin-faced, with a sharp nose and a straggling beard, still lighter than his hair. He took the brace of birds off Moreton's shoulder and threw them aside on the clean white floor. "I'll jest put yer gun up fur ye," he continued, taking the weapon and leaning it against the wall in a corner of the room. Then he quickly fetched a chair. "Set down an' mek yerself at home, I'll punch up the fire, hit's got sorty low; I'll git some light'ood knots."

Moreton found himself in a place whose features at once interested him. Glancing around the room he saw two low beds, a few plain split-bottomed chairs, an old queer "bureau," or chest of drawers, with glass knobs, some rude shelves with ironstone dishes on

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them, a long flint-lock rifle, hanging in buck-horn forks over the door, one of which forks also held a coon-skin bullet-pouch and curiously carved powder-horn. The fire-place before which he sat was broad and deep, roughly lined with jagged stones picturesquely black with fleecy accumulations of soot from pine smoke; it was crossed by a heavy charred wooden crane and on its broad jambs rested a curious collection of cob-pipes, clay-pipes, wooden pipes and soft-stone pipes, along with sundry ragged twists of brown home-raised tobacco. There was a low, wide window on one side of the room, and beside it Moreton's eyes rested for a moment on a slim girl's form in a half-cowering position. She was so turned from him that he could see no more of her face than a rounded line of one cheek. There was a heavy brush of long, bright, yellowish flaxen hair, a very delicate ear and a glimpse of a brown throat and neck. One hand, rather large but shapely, lay along her lap, on the scant folds of a homespun cotton dress, the skirt of which could not quite hide her coarsely-shod feet. There was something curiously striking in this crumpled little figure that held Moreton's gaze for a time. Through an open door that gave into a smaller room, the intermittent hum of a spinning-wheel made itself heard, distinct from the clash and swash of the storm, and a tall angular woman walked back and forth, drawing out and reeling up the coarse thread she was twisting.

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The man had soon fetched wood and pine knots for the fire, and presently a liberal flame wavered up to the mouth of the great old chimney. He turned to Moreton and said:

"Lay off yer coat, strenger, an' git yer shirt dry; hit's outdacious onagreeable fur to hev on a wet shirt."

Moreton smiled pleasantly.

"Thank you, I will," he said, rising and stripping off the stiff jacket. "You are very kind. I am covering your floor with water."

"Shaw, that's nothin'," replied the man, in a tone of gentle contempt; "ef ye'd see hit sometimes when I come in ye mought talk. Them little puddles haint nothin' 'tall. The Colonel an' me jest floods the whole house when we gits wet."

"Wonder ef John haint a comin', Pap?"

This sudden inquiry came in a sweet, half-shy voice from the girl at the window.

"She calls him John, I calls him Colonel," explained the man. Then turning to answer the question:

"Oh, ther's no 'countin' fur him; he's as like to stay out all day and night es any way; hit don't make no differ'nce 'bout rain es to him, do it, Milly?"

The girl had turned her face toward the man when she spoke, but now she averted it again, a little flush gathering on the brown cheek.

"He don't mind no weather, strenger, the Colonel

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don't, rain er sunshine hit's all the same to him, hain't hit, Milly?" continued the host.

"I wush he'd come on back home," exclaimed the girl, "that's what I wush." Moreton had turned his back to the fire. He was astride of the chair and the steam was rising vigorously from his wet garments. Out of the corners of his eyes he kept glancing at that lithe, plump little figure by the window. He had the taste of an artist, and here was a model for brush or chisel to imitate. He was a genuine man, too, and here was a bit of rare feminine beauty, no matter how coarsely clad or how hopelessly uncultured. She had the grace of outline common to wild things, and there was that half-pathetic, half-glad beam in her face that appeals to a man's love of the innocent and his pity of the weak. Her head was small and well-poised above plump shoulders, her bust was full, yet girlish, giving just a hint of that early ripeness so common in southern countries, and her waist and limbs were perfect. At rare intervals one sees such a girl among the hardy peasants of most mountain regions, but not so often in America as elsewhere.

"Do ye ever smoke a pipe, stranger?" inquired the host, offering Moreton a cob pipe and a twist of tobacco.

"Thank you, yes, I will take some of your tobacco; I have a pipe," said the young man, drawing from his vest pocket a small meerschaum, old and dark as

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mahogany. He had heard of the excellence of this mountain home-grown tobacco.

"Hit air purty good, ef I do say hit myself. Most of 'em roun' here's glad to git Tom White's 'backer to chaw an' smoke, hain't they, Milly?" Mr. White thus introduced himself and his tobacco at the same time.

At this point Mrs. White quit her wheel and came into the room. She spoke to Moreton pleasantly, as if she had long known him, smiling cordially.

"Ef you menfolks don't care, I'll jest jine ye for a whiff er two," she said, going to the chimney-jamb and selecting a pipe.

They formed a strange group around that cabin fire. Moreton felt the democratic force of the situation and enjoyed it to the full.

"Hain't ye goin' to have a hand in this here gineral smoke, Milly?" said Mr. White, chuckling jocosely and looking, under comically-drawn eyebrows, at the girl.

"Now, Pap, you know I don't smoke at all," she quickly answered, getting up and leaving the room. Her movement was as light and nimble as that of a hare.

"Course she don't smoke, ye know," said White to Moreton, confidentially lowering his voice; "I wus jest a yankin' at her fur greens; she knows when I'm a greenin' of her, an' she gits tiffy at me in a minute. She's es sharp es a darnin'-needle, Milly is."

"Thomas, ye ortn't ter plague Milly so much, ye'll

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spile her temper. Milly's a mighty good gal," said Mrs. White in a tone half entreaty and half command. It was easy to see that Mrs. White ruled the cabin. After a moment of silence, "She's oneasy 'bout the Colonel, now, but then hit's no use, he's all right, rain er shine," responded the man.

Moreton, whose eyes furtively followed the girl as she left the room, saw that the apartment into which she passed was neatly carpeted and furnished with well-worn easy-chairs, a table and a desk. Between the opening and closing of the door he caught sight, also, of long shelves of books and some pictures. The room appeared quite large and arranged as if for a gentleman's study. The contrast between its almost elegant appointments and the arid blankness of the one in which Moreton sat was so pronounced that, despite his patrician self-control, a wave of surprise passed over his face. The quick eyes of the mountaineer saw this.

"That there air the Colonel's part of the house," he hastily said, a trace of apology and disclaimer in his voice; "hit jest suits him. He's got a outdacious sight o' larnin' an' plenty o' money. He kin buy whatever he wants."

"Yes," said Mrs. White, rather sharply, "an' jest es like es not he's right now a stan'in' under some tree er rock a waitin' fur the rain to quit an' a readin' of a book. Seems powerful quare to me."

Moreton was almost tempted to ask questions, so

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quick an interest had been generated by this gossip about the Colonel. Certainly this was a strange home for a man of wealth and education. Possibly the Colonel was some sport-loving gentleman from New Orleans, Mobile or Montgomery, who had taken these apartments in the cabin as a sort of shooting-box, he thought, for he had heard much of the peculiarities and extravagances of rich Southerners. But his mental discussion of this subject was cut short by a sudden movement on the part of White, who sprang to his feet and elevated his hands.

"Well, hit's jest too outdacious, Sarah," he cried, as if utterly chagrined; "jest to think, the strenger kem in wet an' soaked an' haint hed no liquor!"

"'Bout like sech as we'ns to furgit what we're 'bout," responded Mrs. White; "ye'll find the dim'jon under the tother bed behind the sack o' 'taters."

White dived under the bed in question and drew forth a large earthen bottle.

"Hit air peach liquor," he said, advancing upon Moreton; "the best they air in these parts. Ye must parding us, strenger, fur we clean furgot hit."

Mrs. White fetched a large, heavy tumbler and handed it to Moreton.

"Le' me pour fur ye, stranger," said White, uncorking the bottle. "Ye'll find 'at hit air liquor wo'th a-drinkin'. Hit ain't pizened with no revenue postage, ye may set thet down solid."

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Moreton, with no light inward protest, submitted his lips to the proffered glass. His English taste for excellent drinks was never more deliciously surprised. What began as a formal, carefully guarded sip, crept on into a series of slow quaffs, ending in a final hearty gulp. White grinned delightedly.

"Haint hit good, strenger? Don't hit hev the outdaciousest way o' gittin' to the very marrer of a feller's neck, of any liquor ye ever tasted? Ef hit don't git ther', none don't. The Colonel sez hit's the best liquor 'at he ever tasted! an' *he's* traveled, *he* hes. *He's* been in furren parts, Rome an' France an' them air places."

Moreton was quick to acknowledge that the brandy was surpassingly fine. It had the bouquet of old wine, the body of cognac and the mellow fire of Scotch whisky, along with a faint trace of peach kernels. He thought of a certain London club in which he would like to introduce this Sand Mountain nectar.

White partook sparingly of the precious beverage, and then carefully replaced the bottle in its hiding-place under the bed.

Meantime the heavy throbs of wind and rain shook the cabin to its foundation.

When the mountaineer returned to his chair by the fire, Moreton inquired of him where the brandy was made.

"Oh, I dunno jest wher' hit air made, nohow. We

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calls hit the mounting jew," said White, glancing furtively at his wife. By "jew" he meant dew. The peach brandy made in the sly little stills, scattered among the mountains from North Carolina to Alabama, is sometimes locally called mountain dew, or rather, "mounting jew." It is not the drink of drunkards. In fact the mountaineers, with now and then an exception, are remarkably temperate in the matter of tippling; but the jug of "jew" is the special implement of their hospitality.

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CHAPTER II.

MILLY.

THAT was a rain long to be remembered by the dwellers in the Sand Mountain country. The thunder with which the storm had been heralded soon ceased, and the masses of black clouds spread themselves wide, softening into a smooth, leaden-colored sheet from horizon to horizon, whilst the rain, driven by a throbbing wind, trailed in a wavering flood over the rugged landscape. Every ravine and rocky gully became a torrent of muddy water. The noises of the storm united into a wide bellowing that throbbed heavily around the house whose friendly shelter Moreton was but too glad to retain.

The inmates of the place were not over-talkative, sitting for most of the time listening with rather solemn attention to the heavy beating of the wind and rain.

After an hour had passed and Moreton's clothes had dried somewhat, he was glad to accept his host's invitation to go into the Colonel's part of the house. The glimpse he had caught of this sumptuous-looking room —sumptuous as compared with the rest of the uncouth,

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scantily furnished house—had set him to wondering what it could mean. As he passed through the low door-way the girl sprang up from a stool in front of an easel that stood near the middle of the floor. Her face was burning with the flush of one surprised in an act of the most furtive nature. Moreton paused, feeling with quick certainty how deeply he was embarrassing her. She turned her large eyes on him with a startled, momentary stare, and letting fall a charcoal pencil, fairly ran out of the room, carrying with her what appeared to be a small block of drawing paper. On the easel was an unfinished but powerful sketch of a large pointer dog. The room was littered with evidences of artistic and literary labor and recreation. The walls were lined with books. In the corners stood guns, fishing rods and other implements of sport by flood and field. On a table was a fine microscope, a tiny crucible and a blow-pipe. A pair of slippers sat on the broad hearth, and a sober-looking dressing-gown lay across a chair. Evidently the Colonel was a man who knew how to take his ease in his inn.

Moreton passed along by the book-shelves, glancing at the titles of the books, finding side by side the works of Stuart Mill and the poems of Andre Chenier, the novels of George Eliot and the rhymes of Jasmin the Troubadour, volumes of La Place, Goethe and Newton set among the stories of Thomas Hardy and William Black, whilst the poems of Longfellow and Tennyson

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and Keats were shoulder to shoulder with the latest fictions of Zola and Daudet. Copies of magazines and weekly literary and art journals were scattered promiscuously about in the room.

"The Colonel he air a outdacious quare man," said White, who had followed Moreton into the room, "but what he don't know hit ain't wo'th a knowin', though I can't jest see what good hit's a doin' of him. S'pose hit's fun for 'im, mebbe, to set here a drawin' of picters an' a writin' an' a paintin' an' all that air sort o' doin's. But then ef he wants to, an' he pays me for the use o' my house, hit's all proper I s'pect. Then he's all over a gentleman, the Colonel air, a perfect gentleman, with a heart es big es a fodder-stack."

"Does the Colonel make this his permanent home?" inquired Moreton, taking up a volume bound in old black leather, and glancing at its title page, on a space of which was written in a rather small but decidedly masculine hand, the name: John Mercer Reynolds.

"Fur more'n six years he's been right here constant, 'ceptin' when he'd go off for a while seein' to 'is business an' sich. Thet's 'is name ther' wher' yer a readin' in the book. I can't read no writin', but I know 'at hit's 'is name, though; Colonel John M. Reynolds, haint hit?"

Moreton made no reply; he was looking at the name in a musing way, his brows slightly contracted. Presently he turned to White and said:

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"Where is Mr. Reynolds?"

"The Colonel he went out a huntin' this mornin' an' he haint come back yet. He'll be in 'fore long, a drippin' like a ash-hopper an' es wet es a swamp," answered White. Then, after a moment's pause he looked quizzically at Moreton and added:

"Ye don't hev any 'quaintance of the Colonel, hev ye?"

"I am not sure. The name is that of a friend of mine whom I have not seen for years. Is he tall and dark with deep gray eyes and—"

"Yes, sir, he air that kind of a man, an' he air fine-lookin' an' handsome an' hes ben all over ever' wher' an' knows all about most ever' thing an' ever' body. Yes, sir, that air Colonel he air a outdacious fine man."

"Yes, yes, he is, no doubt," Moreton responded absently, really quite unaware of what he was saying. His memory was busy with things of the past. Was it possible that he had thus again accidentally stumbled upon Reynolds? Of all the men he ever had met he liked Reynolds best. The very name had its fascination, just as something in the man himself had its mysterious charm, disconnected from any social, moral or intellectual attractiveness.

"Where did Mr. Reynolds come from when he came here?" he demanded, coming suddenly and wholly back to himself and looking at White who had begun to move away.

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"The Colonel he kem f'm—kem f'm—f'm—I couldn't say e'zactly wher' the Colonel kem f'm; but som'ers in furren parts, I'm sartaing of thet."

"Six years ago, I think you told me."

"Yes, a leetle the rise of six. The Colonel he kem yer in Septem'er."

"Sings well, the Colonel, does he?"

"Sing! dern, but ye orter heer 'im, strenger. He ken beat a meth'dis' nigger all to striffins. He air a singer for ter mek yer hair stan', the Colonel air."

"Plays superbly on the guitar?"

"On the git-tar? Yer may say he does, strenger. When he plays onto the git-tar, I calls hit a pickin' onto the git ther', and the Colonel he ken git ther' with the bes' chunes 'at ever split the wind, dead sartaing."

White's sallow face betrayed, as he finished speaking, a perfect faith in the legitimacy of his humor, and Moreton felt bound to laugh.

At this point the girl came shyly to the door and said:

"Pap, dinner air ready."

Moreton could not refrain from looking boldly, even searchingly, into that sweet, innocent, half-vacant face. He felt an obscure pang enter his breast, as if in some way her pathetic, hopeless prettiness accused him. She was probably sixteen, and, though rather slight, remarkably well-formed and graceful. Her scant, coarse drapery served to indicate more than to hide her

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body's curves and the outlines of her supple limbs. It was her face, however, that had in it the power of leaving in Moreton's memory a haunting, elusive impression that would not go out. She did not take a seat with her parents and their guest at the table, but filled the place of serving maid, passing silently behind their chairs, offering the dishes of ill-cooked coarse food and anticipating with swift movements the needs of each.

"Ef the Colonel wus here now," said White, poising a piece of fried bacon between his plate and his mouth, "ye'd never git him to eat this yere kind er victuals. Nary time, sir. He'd hev br'iled chicken, er squir'l, an' white bread an' milk an' I don't know what all. The Colonel he air high tony dinktom 'bout what he chaws, le' me tell ye. He keeps a lot o' wine in 'is closet, 'an hit air outdacious fine liquor, too."

Moreton, whose eyes followed Milly at every fair opportunity, saw her lean over White's chair and heard her say in a low, earnest tone:

"Hush, Pap, John he wudn' like hit ef ye said so much 'bout his doin's. I wush ye'd keep still 'bout him anyhow."

It was little more than a pretense of eating with Moreton. The corn bread, collards, sweet potatoes and fat fried bacon, which were to be washed down with bitter coffee, did not suit his English appetite. Then, too, he was so busy with the thought of Reynolds and

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so troubled by the wistful face of this strangely beautiful mountain girl, that even the choicest dinner might not have tempted him.

The rain held on steadily until far along in the afternoon. Reynolds did not come, and when Moreton saw the clouds breaking away in the west, and heard the swash of the shower slowly sinking into a desultory pattering on the cabin roof, he sat down at the Colonel's desk and wrote a short note as follows:

"MY DEAR REYNOLDS:

"If I am not mistaken, I have at last found you again. If I am mistaken you will pardon my blunder. If I were perfectly sure that you are my old friend whom I lost so easily and would give so much to see, I would not go from this house without having heard your voice and held your hand. I am so sure that you are the very Reynolds to whom I owe every thing and whose friendship is the warmest spot in my life, that I am nearly on the point of staying at a venture; but the rain seems over, and I have a very long walk and shall go at once. I am at the ——— Hotel in Birmingham. Won't you come to see me at once? If you are *my* Reynolds you know how you will be received; if I have blundered and you are not the friend I have so long missed, you shall have the humble apologies of

"EDWARD MORETON."

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When this hasty epistle was finished, Moreton addressed it and placed it on the table. A few minutes later the girl came into the room. Moreton rose.

"Will you be kind enough," he said to her, "to hand Colonel Reynolds this letter when he comes home?"

She looked sideways at him and blushed scarlet, but said nothing and did not move from where she had stopped beside the door. A bright strand of her hair had fallen forward across her shoulder and breast.

"I shall be greatly obliged," he continued, turning the envelope about on the table with his finger. "You will be doing me a great favor. Colonel Reynolds is a dear friend of mine."

Unconsciously he used a wheedling tone in speaking to her, as he would have done in trying to coax a little child.

She moved one hand nervously, and a pallor encroached upon the flush in her cheeks. Her sweet, strange eyes dilated with some sudden emotion. It may have been mere bashfulness and the embarrassment of ignorance and timidity. She appeared so helpless, so prettily forlorn, so innocent and sweet, and yet she seemed so vulgar, uncouth and hopelessly shallow, withal. Moreton, despite himself, felt the infection of her timidity and shyness and became silent. She stood for a time as if wavering between opposing impulses, then in a sudden and breathless way she said:

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"Does John know you? Where'd ye ever see John? He never told me 'bout ye." She was still glancing sideways at him over her shoulder, and standing with one foot resting across the toe of the other, her left elbow pressed against the wall.

Moreton smiled and shook his head.

"It was a long way off from here that I saw him. Beyond the sea, across many countries. Ask him to tell you about Edward Moreton. He will remember a great many things that we did. We had many adventures together. He's a grand fellow."

"What air a grand feller? What d'ye mean by that there?" she slowly asked.

"Oh, I mean a great deal, every thing that is worth meaning," said Moreton. Then feeling that he had failed to satisfy her, he added in a very gentle tone: "I mean that he is good and that I like him."

She smiled, and a sudden pleasure flashed from her eyes; but her face quickly resumed its almost stolid repose and the vague trace of helplessness and pathetic innocence returned.

The rain was over and Moreton got ready to go just as the sun, now far down the west, swung free of the scattering cloud and flamed against a space of intensely blue sky above the most distant purple mountain peaks.

White refused to accept any pay for the shelter and food given to Moreton, and, carrying his practical

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mountain generosity still further, he slung the brace of turkeys across his shoulder and led the way for more than a mile, to put his guest into a path which was the shortest route over the mountain to a highway leading into Birmingham. The two men shook hands at parting on the highest swell of a heavy ridge, whence they could see the little city, with its great columns of coal-smoke and its shining white houses, lying far below amidst the gentle undulations of the valley. A long walk yet remained for Moreton, with no companion save the little spaniel; but his thoughts were of such a nature that he scarcely noted how rough and tiresome was the way. The clouds were now all gone and the sky, as night drew on, was filled with stars that, seen through the purified air, appeared to flame and waver like the flare of sunlight on ice. The temperature had fallen several degrees, giving a keen edge to the breeze which was now out of the north-west; but there still arose from the pine woods that resinous fragrance which is a balm for every wound that occasional inclemencies of the mountain weather may give. The streams had subsided as suddenly as they had risen, and all nature seemed hastening to regain that tranquil equilibrium for which the southern winters are noted.

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CHAPTER III.

MR. HAWKINS NOBLE.

MORETON, the more he thought the matter over, grew surer and surer of the fact that he had discovered Reynolds, his long lost friend. They had been art students together in Paris, and had been companions in a rather wild eastern ramble during which some quite memorable adventures had befallen them. Finally they had separated, on account of a mild sort of quarrel over a sweetheart, Reynolds quitting the field most mysteriously, leaving Moreton free to press his suit, which at the last wholly failed. It does not matter here what was the extent or color of their disagreement, but it may be said that there was nothing violent or tragic in it. In fact it may all be summed up in the sentence: Reynolds disappeared; and so sudden and secret was his going that Moreton lost him quite as effectually as if he had died and been buried. Such a disappearance has in it an element of tragic mystery that burns into one's memory. Moreton really knew little of Reynolds, save that he was an American and a Southerner, a fascinating companion, and a genial, brave, liberal fellow. If their parting had been the ordinary one, such as must come at length to

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any traveling companions, perhaps a few months might have sufficed to obliterate all regrets connected with it. But the peculiar circumstances under which it had come about had served to fasten it with a rather fiery emphasis in Moreton's memory. He remembered Reynolds as a proud, peculiarly sensitive man, given to excess of sentiment, an extremist, running to great lengths of self-indulgence at times, and at other times a model of temperateness that bordered on utter self-denial. A man with a violent conscience, prone to brood over follies and indulge gloomy regret for sins about which most young men would unhesitatingly have made broad jokes, but yet a man given to unlimited pleasures. In person he was of noble proportions, quite a typical low-country Southerner, bearing in his high-bred face an air of fearlessness and obvious pride touched to a degree with something that suggested recklessness. He was reckless, indeed, now and again, always, however, suffering the extremest pangs of repentance after each lapse into excesses.

It had seemed to surprise Reynolds in the last degree when he discovered that Moreton had become his rival, and surprise had quickly blazed up into furious anger. For a time it had appeared as if there must be a fight, but before this could happen Reynolds controlled himself and the reaction came. Moreton appeared to be successful, and his rival, in a fit of gloom, disappeared from the scene. It is easy to understand

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how Moreton would be affected by such a turn of affairs, and when, a day or two after the events of the preceding chapter, Reynolds appeared at the hotel in Birmingham, the meeting was, of course, a very cordial one; for Moreton was in no mood to allow his friend any room to doubt his sincerity. He had not prospered with his suit after Reynolds' departure. Somehow he could not press it with that ardor which kept his heart on fire so long as a rival was in view. It may have been that the mystery of Reynolds' flight cast a damper on the feelings of the young lady as well as over his own spirit. It is even possible that in truth she preferred the impulsive, magnetic Southerner to the rather matter-of-fact Englishman. At all events, Moreton's wooing had languished with the ending of the rivalry, the young lady showing a decided willingness to have done with the affair on the shortest possible notice.

Such things may appear to conclude very easily and naturally, to the best satisfaction of those concerned; but usually a sting remains with one or more of the actors that time is slow to remove. Moreton had felt this sting from two sources. He had lost his friend, he had lost his sweetheart. His friendship had been deep and true, his passion for the girl had been strong, no matter if not rooted deeper than his fancy. At one point conscience griped Moreton with bitter force: he had been ungrateful to Reynolds, who had not hesitated to risk his life for him in the most desperate exigency

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of his quite eventful career. And now Reynolds had added self-sacrifice to heroism.

So that it will be readily understood how Moreton easily fell into a state of mind that rendered him restless and self-accusing. His great wish that he might one day find his friend again, and in some way make reparation for the injury done him, was tinged with such sentimentality as the situation would naturally generate in a mind, which though quite practical and well-balanced, was somewhat given to visionary fancies.

They sat down to a good dinner, and, with due appreciation of its qualities, paused between its courses to let their conversation lightly circle around the point of their past trouble, without coming quite to it. Reynolds knew that Moreton was still a bachelor, he had caught this much from his friend's manner and talk. It flashed through his mind that, after all, he had, perhaps, done himself great wrong and Moreton no good by acting up to a standard of duty recognized by few men. But it was too late to consider the matter now. It was all over and the dead past must bury its dead. Besides, had he not long ago dashed aside the poor bauble he had once called love! The subject could not, would not be avoided, nevertheless, and when it had been reached and fully talked over, both felt relieved.

"She is married," said Moreton, "and is living in Florence. Her husband is Count somebody and she is an invalid, so I have heard."

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"I give you my word, Moreton," responded Reynolds, after a moment's silence, "that I am sincerely glad she is married, and quite sorry that she has lost her superb health. Suppose we dismiss her forever from our minds and our lives."

"Done!" cried Moreton almost jocularly, extending his hand. "I have been deuced near proposing that for the last half hour. It takes a load off my breast and a cloud off my mind. Here's to a clear future, old fellow!"

He filled their glasses and they drank in a genial if not a jovial mood. It was a light way in which to dispose of so weighty a matter as this had once been considered by them; but then it is the tricksy summer breath that tranquilizes the sea after the tropic storm. They were both glad to unburden themselves of certain troublesome doubts as to the genuineness of the passion each had professed. This done, that episode in their lives seemed to remove itself to a vast distance in the dim past, so they fancied, and they dismissed it as a departed illusion of their youth. Moreton looked at his friend with more than the old admiration. Indeed Reynolds was a man of superb physique and his face was one to win men and charm women. With all his health and strength and what might be called weather-stain, there was in his dark gray eyes and in his low, rich voice, a suggestion of that nonchalance and indolence which have always been characteristic of the

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highest type of Southerners. Nearly six feet in stature, square shouldered, slender, compact, every inch an athlete, he gave one an idea of strength, both physical and mental, which needed to be roused into action.

"I think it deuced strange, don't you know, that I should have stumbled into your den here in the mountains," said Moreton. "It is like romance. They put such things in novels."

"It was a clever turn of luck," lightly responded Reynolds, "or, perhaps I should say fate. No doubt it is ordered that you and I shall yet work out together some subtle decree of Providence. After all, incidents and events do not come of haphazard."

"I never philosophize, you know," said Moreton. "I am never expecting any thing save the very thing I am looking and striving for. I was turkey hunting when I found your outlandish cabin. What the deuce are you doing over there?"

"That is a hard question. I have spent some delightfully quiet, uneventful years in that house. I find good shooting at times, the air is pure and sweet, the water is excellent, the retirement is perfect." Reynolds paused for a time and then continued: "Oh well, I had grown tired of wandering and rather disgusted with the world in general and I fancied I should enjoy being a hermit for a while. I tried it and found it charming."

Moreton thought he detected evidence in his friend's

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manner of a reserve of some stronger reasons for thus hiding himself away from the world; but he took the explanation without further question.

"That's a pretty lass of White's," Moreton said, after the conversation had rambled over such parts of Reynolds' life for the past few years as he cared to lay bare. "Her sweet, solemn, smiling, troubled face has haunted me ever since I saw her."

Reynolds laughed.

"Don't make too much fun of the poor little thing," he said, half-seriously, half lightly. "Hers is a vacant lot. She is as scentless and colorless as she is cramped and undeveloped. I can't imagine what she was made for."

"But what a form and what a haunting, hungry, sweet face she has!"

Reynolds looked with a sudden surprise into Moreton's eyes, his own dilating. Presently he laughed again.

"I do believe you are in earnest," he exclaimed, in a tone at once deprecatory and querulous, "for you couldn't have the heart, even at this distance, to ridicule the unfortunate little creature. In this region the poor whites are all deplorably ignorant and queer; but she—she is a pathetic cipher, poor thing."

"Physically she is perfect," insisted Moreton. "Can it be possible that you, a poet and artist, have all these years overlooked, ignored, waived aside such a model?

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I tell you, Reynolds, she's a genuine wood nymph, don't you know, a dryad whom the satyrs have scared out of her wits. I never saw such eyes, such lips and——"

"Oh come now," said Reynolds, "I am not going to listen to such nonsense. Besides, it strikes me as next to brutal to think of discussing the charms of an arid, dull, ugly little cracker girl —— well no, not a cracker, either, a Sandlapper is the local phrase. The fact that such girls exist and must become women and be mothers of like beings, is to me a subject that it is a virtue to shun. On such a theme seriousness is disheartening, levity is diabolical."

"Every thing *au sérieux*, as of old!" exclaimed Moreton, "you bewildering old philanthropist! I am too happy to quarrel with you now. Wait till the newness of having discovered your hiding place has somewhat rubbed off and I'll give you punch for punch with a will. But I do say, in all candor, that I never was so struck with any bit of wild beauty as I was with that queer, solemn-eyed girl of White's. She might make any painter's fortune as a Daphne or——" Reynolds interrupted him:

"It is only once in a century or two," he said, "that the world's intermittent sentiment will permit a Millet or a Burns to cast the glamor of genius over the stolid ugliness and the immitigable emptiness of peasant life. As for me, I have no sympathy with it from the standpoint of art. There is no artistic alchemy that can

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make a sow's ear fine or beautiful. Those who undertake to idealize ignorance, stupidity and coarseness are worse than such realists as Zola, because they willfully deceive those whom they succeed in interesting."

"Go on, wade out, you know I can't follow you," exclaimed Moreton. "I love the shallow places, the soft sweet edges of all sorts of streams; but I'll bet five to one on you for touching bottom at all points and without weights!"

Reynolds laughed and waved aside the wine his friend offered.

At this moment a portly gentleman, wearing a bland smile between his iron-gray mutton-chop whiskers, and a vast gold seal below his vest, approached Moreton from another part of the large dining room. This was Mr. Hawkins Noble, a person of importance in Birmingham, a banker in fact, whose money and financial sagacity had given to that prosperous little city the larger part of its vim and activity. It was to be seen at a glance that he was what some one has aptly and inelegantly phrased as a "big fish in a little puddle." He was a New Yorker, and his connection with a great banking house in the metropolis had followed him to Birmingham with the effect of a separate atmosphere circulating close about his stout figure. There was in his movements a celerity quite out of keeping with his heavy limbs and rotund body, and his small blue eyes had a twinkle which was a compromise

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between the glint of ice and the genial reflection from a June sky. He rubbed his hands together as he came near the table.

"Hello, Moreton," he exclaimed, with the intonation of one speaking at a telephone, "pardon me for interrupting you, but I have a matter of importance. Oh, keep your seat," he hastily added, as Moreton made a movement to rise, "it's nothing in the slightest private, only an urgent invitation for you to join me in a most delightful bit of field sport. General DeKay, who owns a grand plantation and quail preserve below here, has sent me word to collect a party of gentlemen and bring them next week for a few days' shooting. How does that strike you?"

"It strikes me deuced hard," answered Moreton. "Don't you know I never did refuse a thing like that, never."

Mr. Noble laughed. He looked like a man who thoroughly enjoyed laughing for the sake of the general shaking up it gave him. Reynolds could not help wondering how this rather over-corpulent old gentleman could ever manage to get much comfort out of active field sports.

"It's bound to be a most delightful affair," continued Mr. Noble. "The General has some fine dogs, I shall take mine, you yours: now where can I find one or two more good fellows who are up to such music?"

Moreton rose.

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"Allow me, Mr. Noble, to present my friend, Colonel Reynolds, who is a most enthusiastic sportsman and who has a choice kennel."

The banker reached for Reynolds' hand with a readiness and swiftness which, though incomparable, had no appearance of undue haste. It was merely indicative of a nimbleness and a promptness for which in all his affairs Mr. Noble was noted. His mind and body acted together on the instant and on the slightest call.

"An enthusiastic sportsman," he said, "is a man after my own heart-pattern. I am glad of your acquaintance, Colonel Reynolds. May I book you and your choicest dogs for the shooting? Don't say no, for we shall have a grand time of it."

"Why, I thank you, indeed, sir, but I can hardly say whether——"

"Come, now, Reynolds," interposed Moreton, "I can't go without you, you know, and you mustn't refuse. I fancy I can see the dogs down to a point now and the birds whirring up from the cover. It makes my blood tingle to think of it!"

"Allow me also to insist," added Mr. Noble with a nimble bow and genial smile. "I can vouch for the sport, as also for General DeKay's cordial hospitality. He has a large preserve, which he has been at great pains to stock, and he insists upon my bringing a little army down to shoot with him over his grounds."

Reynolds saw no way out of it; in fact he quickly

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felt the fascination of the proposed sport taking hold of him. He had been shut up in the mountains for so long that the thought of a few days with jovial companions in the open fields of the low country was like a fragrant breath from the past.

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Noble," he at length said, "and if I can, in your opinion, add any thing to the success of your very attractive plan, I ought not to refuse, especially as I am hungry for a genuine old-fashioned day with the quails."

"Good!" exclaimed the banker, again darting his soft white hand towards Reynolds, "I am delighted. I am off now on some pressing business; shall be glad to give you and Mr. Moreton further details of our project in due time. Shall hope to have you both at my house to dine before we are off for General De Kay's."

He bowed with amazing suppleness and walked swiftly from the room. He left behind him, so to speak, lingering in the air, a suggestion of irrepressible alertness, outrightness and vim.

"There's an old boy for you," said Moreton, resuming his seat at the table and motioning Reynolds to do likewise. "I have never seen another at all like him. Make a friend of him, and there's no end to the good he will do you. There's not a doubt that he left urgent business to come here and get me into his party. I'm delighted that you were here, don't you know, for we'll

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have a rare lark. General DeKay is one of your fine old-time Southern planters, I'm told, whose hospitality is as broad as his fields."

"I'm a fool for consenting to join you," Reynolds bluntly exclaimed, "but I am committed to the folly and must make the most of it."

"Since when have you come to consider a day or so behind the dogs in good quail cover a folly?" said Moreton, with a ring of good-humored resentment in his voice.

"You misconstrue me," replied Reynolds, "I shrink from the other feature of the affair. I am out of society for good and all. I fear there will be more women than dogs and quail."

Moreton laughed as a vision of Mr. Noble's charming daughter arose in his mind. She at least would be one of the party.

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CHAPTER IV.

WHITE PLAYS "SEVING UP."

REYNOLDS spent the next few days with Moreton, and, before he was fully aware of it, he had accepted an invitation to dine at Mr. Noble's house, where he would meet "two or three charming friends," as the banker had declared, "without the least formality in the world."

The weather had taken a delightful change, the wind shifting to the south and bringing from the Gulf of Mexico, over the vast extent of pine woods, a summer balminess and pungency. The sky, without a cloud, blue and dreamy bent above the gray-green hills with a Sabbath purity that made every aspect of the landscape surrounding the little city one of sweet guardianship and secure repose, quite at variance with certain social conditions which rendered a considerable portion of the city's populace at times turbulent and dangerous. Many miners and operatives in the vast iron works had fallen into the habit of coming together, at such hours as they were unemployed, in the gaudily tinseled liquor saloons and gambling dens with which certain streets were liberally supplied. Here they

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would meet the quiet-mannered but impetuous and bellicose mountaineers, with whom they quarreled and fought, sometimes with fatal results.

On an evening a day or two prior to the time set for the dinner at Mr. Noble's, Moreton had a little adventure. It chanced that some business with a foreman of one of his iron establishments had kept him until some time after dark in the office of the latter. In going back to his hotel he took a short route which led him through one of the worst streets in the city. Passing by the brilliantly lighted dens he could hear the clink of glasses and the boisterous voices of the drinkers and hangers-on. Once or twice he was forced to leave the side-walk in order to avoid groups of wrangling fellows who appeared on the point of going into a free-for-all fight. It was while making his way around one of these clumps of would-be rioters that a voice of peculiarly familiar accent reached his ear. It was a high tenor, drawling as follows:

"Hit air my bottom erpinion 'at I ken whirp out the last dad-burned one uf ye, an' 'en not dull the p'int uf this air ole frog-sticker nuther."

"Well, why don't ye do it? Talk's talk, but doin' it is another thing intirely," retorted a heavier voice with just a trace of Irish in it.

"Hit ain't fur me to go to cuttin' uf ye, ef ye keeps off'n me; but I'll jest be b'iled up an' chawed over ef I don't let yer back bone out in front uf ye, ef ye

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starts onto me. An' now ye've hearn me," was the tenor's quick response.

Moreton stopped short and glanced sharply into the midst of the group. There was White with a long knife in one hand and a heavy stone in the other, his wizened face and sunken eyes full of defiance and his gaunt frame rigid but ready for desperate action.

"Kem on, ye sneakin' keerd-shufflers, an' I'll jest cut ye inter striffins," he continued; "this here knife hit air a eetchin' fur yer livers an' lights, hit air!"

Just then a pistol gleamed in the hand of the man nearest Moreton, and the clear, keen click of the lock was sharply audible. It was a slender, but very dangerous sound.

"Make shore fire with yer shootin-iron," White added quickly, his voice rising into a thin falsetto, "fur ef ye don't hit air good-by ter you, hit air!" As he spoke he prepared to rush forward.

On the instant there would have been deadly work, had not Moreton interfered.

"Here! what does this mean?" he exclaimed in a loud, authoritative way, stepping boldly into the midst of the men.

His commanding figure, cool bearing and patrician dress wrought an effect of which the sturdiest policeman might well have been proud. "Come with me, Mr. White," he continued, "and you fellows had better get to your homes in quick time."

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He did not pause or hesitate, but took White by the arm with a strong grip and led him away. No doubt the very suddenness and boldness of Moreton's action had much to do with the success of his endeavor to befriend White, but it is quite probable that the respect for superior manners, dress and personal appearance, which underlies the gross democracy of the mob, did more. White himself would have resented, with all a mountaineer's well-fostered stubbornness, any man's interference with his luxury of a fight, had that man been, though his best friend, one of his own or a similar class. But he promptly recognized Moreton as both his friend and superior and so allowed himself to be hurried away, the young man's grip on his arm reminding him of a physical force fully proportioned to Moreton's rather massive stature. They soon reached a street where no further danger need be feared, and here Moreton, releasing White's arm, said:

"What sort of a beastly trouble is this you have been getting into? What was all that quarrel about?"

"Pa'cel o' them air dad burned gam'lers a rowin' wi' me," replied White, rather doggedly, closing his knife and putting it into his pocket.

"Fleeced you, I suppose; won all your money. Better let them alone, they'll always beat you," said Moreton, his voice very naturally taking on an advisory and cautionary ring.

"Yer calc'late ruther short, jest ther', Mr. Moreting

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(b'lieve thet air's yer name), fur I hev four dollars uf them same fellers' good money inter my jeens right now," White answered, with a chuckle of profound satisfaction. "W'en ye serpose 'at any uf them air gam'lers ken beat me a playin' uf seving up, w'y then ye air a foolin' yerself outdacious. Es fur them tother games, I don't know much 'bout 'em, but seving up hit air my game, jest to a dot, an' I do s'prise some uf 'em outdacious a playin' uf that air small game."

"Are you going out to your home to-night?" inquired Moreton.

"Yes, an' I s'pect 'at them air weemin 'll be outdacious oneasy 'bout me, too, fur I promersed 'em 'at I'd be back by dinner time o' day, when I left 'em this mornin'," said White, rather dolefully.

After a moment of silence, he added in a hesitating way:

"Hev ye seen any thing uf the Colonel fur the last day er two? We've been kinder sorty oneasy 'bout him, too. Milly she say 'at she most knows 'at he air gone fur good an' 'at he ain't a comin' back no more. But then I think he air."

"Oh, Mr. Reynolds is here with me, don't you know, at my hotel. He's all right," said Moreton. "I hope your wife and daughter are well. Please give them my regards. They were so kind to me that day I staid in your house."

"Them's outdacious good weemin o' mine, Mr.

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Moreting, 'specially Milly, she air a gal 'at's all wool an' a yard wide, to a dead sartinty, she air," was the reply.

Moreton was not well enough versed in the mountain lingo to catch the full force of White's realistic comparison, but he understood that it was meant to express admiration and affection of a very touching sort, and immediately there arose in his mind a vision of Milly, as she had stood by the door that day, with one foot on the other and her solemnly innocent face half averted.

The two men walked on together to a point where they must separate if White went home.

"I hev ter go down this here street ef I want er git ter my lay-out," said the mountaineer, stopping. "I er much erbleeged to ye fur what ye've done."

Prompted by some impulse quite foreign to his English nature, Moreton held out his hand and said:

"Don't forget to give my kindest regards to your wife and daughter."

"Sarting, sarting," exclaimed White, "I'll do thet air." He took Moreton's hand with a hearty grasp, but stood as if faltering and hesitating. "Hit air kinder foolish, but I wanter ask ye ter see ef ye can't git the Colonel to kem home poorty soon. Sorter seems like things don't june roun' jest right ef he ain't ther'." Somewhere between his words there was a half-expressed meaning that seemed to reach and yet baffle and elude Moreton's understanding. "Ye needn' mind

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er sayin' 'at ther's trouble 'bout 'im er nothin'," continued White, "but jest kinder git 'im ter kem home like. Milly she hain't stout, no how." There was a tender tremor in his voice as he spoke the concluding words.

Moreton assured him that Reynolds would come home within a few days, and they parted.

White had been drinking some, but not enough to intoxicate him beyond a certain loosening of the tongue and a breaking of that crust of half-comical reserve which usually covers the Sand Mountain man. What he had said had affected Moreton peculiarly. As he slowly walked to the hotel "Milly she hain't stout, no how," kept ringing in the young man's mind, as some verse of a foolish song might have done, with an appealing, shadowy sort of sadness in it. He was far from being sentimental, he had never taken any interest in people socially much lower than himself, he had even been suspected of mild brutality in his feelings towards women of the lower classes, not because the brutality did really exist, but on account of his utter lack of sympathy with ignorance and ugliness; and now he was frankly acknowledging to himself that Milly White had touched a very sensitive chord in his nature. In some mysterious way he was actually sympathizing with her, as if in an elusive and nameless trouble. The feeling was not a deep or pervading one: it was, indeed, very slight, a mere breath, so to speak, barely rippling the

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surface of his consciousness, but it was so new and unique that it made itself distinctly and immediately separable in quality from all his past experiences. If the question had been put to him: Why do you think of Milly White—what is the basis of your interest in her? He would have answered: I have no interest in her—I think of her simply because her strangely sweet and yearning face stays in my memory and will not be cast out: there was an appeal in her eyes so mysteriously affecting.

White went afoot over the hills to his home, following the meanderings of a narrow, rugged road. He was not happy, though he sang nasal snatches of camp-meeting or revival songs as he trudged along. He had a sense of the unworthiness of his day's occupation that the jingle of the four dollars in his pocket could not neutralize. When he reached the rude gate in front of his cabin he encountered Milly. She was leaning against one of the low posts, her head bare and her face showing over-pale in the star-light.

"Hello, Milly!" he gently exclaimed. "Hain't ye gone ter bed yet?"

She unlatched the gate for him without speaking. He passed through and took her by the arm.

"He air down yer in town, Milly, down yer wi' the man 'at stopped in outen the rain thet air day," he almost whispered. "He air all right; he air comin' home to-morrer er nex' day."

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"I wush he would come," she murmured, and followed her father into the cabin.

Meantime Moreton went to his hotel, where he met Reynolds, to whom he gave the details of his street adventure.

Reynolds' face darkened a little.

"I wish I could have seen White," he said, in a tone that hinted of vexation. "I suspect that he has taken advantage of my absence by going on a spree. Are you sure he went directly home?"

"He said he was going, he went in that direction," Moreton answered. "He was inquiring about you, and I told him you were in my care and quite safe."

Reynolds laughed.

"Did he say that his *weemin*, as he calls them, were uneasy about me?"

"Something of the sort, I believe, but I gave him satisfactory assurance. He'll report you all right."

Reynolds laughed again, a laugh that left Moreton in some sort of doubt. It was a laugh that seemed to be tinged with contempt, or bitterness, or some other element quite foreign to any amused or pleasant state of mind.

"He told me in all seriousness," Moreton deliberately but lightly added, "that his daughter believed you would never come back."

"Yes," said Reynolds, "she always imagines some

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such thing when I am away. She's a queer little simpleton, but I owe a good deal to her and her mother. On that account I overlook a great many little annoyances they cause me."

They went in to supper and the conversation turned to a discussion of the preparations for General DeKay's shooting party. But all the time Moreton's mind kept returning to the mystery which he now felt was hovering about his friend's life, a mystery he dared not attempt to solve. It was plain to him that Reynolds had a secret which this lonely life in the mountains was intended to hide from the world. It is not difficult to discover that one's friend is not opening his whole heart to one, when such is the fact. The reserve of some heavy sorrow, or regret, or remorse may be carefully concealed, but its very concealment is disclosed by the sealed chamber whose door would, we know, be flung wide open, but for the skeleton within. A slight evasion, now and then, of certain careless questions, little hints inadvertently let fall in moments of apparent abstraction, certain abrupt changes of the drift of his talk when the subject was his own experiences, gave to Reynolds' conversation a quality which, to a nature like Moreton's, was as tantalizing as it was suggestive of some hidden trouble.

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CHAPTER V.

SOME LIGHT TALK.

MR. NOBLE'S house in Birmingham was one of our ugly brick-red American cottages, with many sharp points to its roof, many slender chimneys, a profusion of bay windows and plate glass, and an air of band-box newness, suggestive of fresh paint and scarcely dry plastering. It stood on a slight knoll overlooking a quiet part of the little city, and commanding a view of the mountains in every direction, as well as of the broken picturesque valley. Its ample lawn, shaded by a few native trees, had been set with grass, as if in defiance of Southern custom, and the broad walks were not flanked with the conventional parallel rows of shrubs and flowers so dear to the heart of the old-time Southerner.

As Moreton and Reynolds passed through the low iron gate in front of this house, on the evening of Mr. Noble's dinner, they paused just inside the inclosure, and turned about to take a view of the surrounding landscape. The horizon in every direction was broken by irregular lines of blue hills and mountains, the higher peaks sharply defined against a soft crepuscular

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sky, whilst the lower ones, seen through the thin gray smoke of the valley, were scarcely distinguishable from the fragmentary clouds floating lazily in the furthest distance. A gentle breeze, running northward, with just an audible ripple, had in it, along with its mountain freshness and purity, a dreamy, languor-breeding influence, suggestive of those palm-studded islands and warm seas a little further south. Overhead the sky was as blue and soft as that of Lombardy, and set with fervid, flaring stars.

"This strikes me as very near the ideal climate, don't you know, a golden mean between the indolent, dreamy South and the restless, over-realistic North," said Moreton, taking in a deep draught of the sweet, stimulating air.

"The air is pure and wholesome," said Reynolds, "but the scenery is hopelessly monotonous and uninspiring. Six years of it will dry your enthusiasm down to the impalpable dust of dreams. I fear I have had too much of it."

"No doubt you have," Moreton bluntly responded, "considering your way of taking it, crooning over there in that remote cabin, aloof from every genuine human influence, morbidly browsing the weeds of your own conscience." His tone was light and chaffing, but Reynolds, as if cut by some hidden meaning of the words, started a little, then, catching his friend's humor, said:

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"Well, let's go into this palace of pleasure and perhaps I may there get my conscience purified in the light of —"

> "The light of her eyes
> And the dew of her lips,
> Where the moth never flies
> And the bee never sips,"—

Moreton hummed, taking his friend's arm and moving toward the house. The windows gave forth long streams of light, and a subdued sound of voices came from within the brilliant rooms. To the somewhat rusted taste of Reynolds there came, along with the gleam of chandeliers and the polite murmur, a little thrill, as if he were about to re-enter a long-abandoned but much loved atmosphere. Already the old fascination was returning. He saw through an open window the flutter of fans and the gleam of white throats, laces and pearls. For a single instant all the charms of young womanhood gayly but modestly attired, ready for its half-shy, half-daring little assaults upon the masculine heart, burst upon him. As a drunkard, after a long abstinence, feels his whole nature change at the first sip of wine, Reynolds was at once borne off his guard, and for the instant all the period of his mountain seclusion disappeared. It was as if his gay, almost dissolute life had never been arrested. Some one struck a few rapid chords from a grand piano and then followed some airy popular song.

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"Why the house is full," said Moreton in an undertone, as they mounted the broad steps to the hall door. "Mr. Noble has exceedingly liberal views on the subject of 'a few friends.' We are going to see the *elite* of Montgomery as well as the *bon ton* of Birmingham, if I guess correctly."

Reynolds made no response. He paused on the threshold and stood for a moment in a faltering attitude. But for the presence of Moreton, he would have turned away and retraced his steps to the hotel, or, more likely, to his cabin in the mountains. One who for years has been entirely beyond the outmost pale of polite society, is apt to feel this trepidation, when on the point of re-entering the charmed circle.

The company was not so large as Moreton had imagined. The evening was warm enough to admit of open windows, hence the sound of voices had the more easily reached the outside. Fifteen or twenty persons, mostly young, were scattered throughout a row of elaborate rooms, now made into one by means of folding doors and movable curtains. Mr, Noble, if possible more supple and elastic than ever before, and Mrs. Noble, a tall woman, dressed in elegant taste, greeted Moreton and Reynolds with admirable ease and cordiality. The company was so small that the arrival of two new guests was at once known to all. Moreton glanced about, seeing many faces that he knew, but Reynolds felt himself a stranger to all. His tall, erect figure,

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bronzed face and graceful bearing attracted the furtive glances of more than one woman present. Moreton, in bowing low over Mrs. Noble's hand, had managed to say to her unheard by any one else: "Mr. Reynolds, my friend here, is a misanthrope and has long been out of society. You will do me the greatest of favors if you will make him the especial object of your gracious attention this evening."

"Certainly," she answered, in a very sweet and low voice, "you shall see how readily I grant your every request, Mr. Moreton. Leave your friend to me."

She kept her promise with scrupulous fidelity, and Reynolds found himself drawn into the midst of a charming circle, where, for a time, all memory of the past few years was drowned in the music of gentle voices.

Miss Cordelia Noble, the banker's daughter, with whom he presently found himself in conversation, was a merry-eyed, ruby-lipped blonde, as supple and ready as her father and at need as dignified and gracious as her mother. She had just returned with her aunt from New York and talked in a most charming way of the opening of the social season there, of the parties, the opera, the art exhibitions and all the other features of importance to fashionable folk in the metropolis. Her voice was a sincere, honest, girlish one, and her sayings were spiced with those little grotesqueries of thought and phrasing which stay with a bright girl for a while after her so-called school days are over. Reynolds had

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not dreamed of how hungry he really was for even this slight sort of social food, and it was well for him that he did not suspect that, before the dinner was half over, he had become, by force of tacit consent amongst all present, the center of the evening's interest.

Moreton was delighted. He had determined to win his friend back from his hermit's life, no matter what might have been in the first place the secret reason for his retirement to such an outlandish den as the mountaineer's cabin.

"My father has told me that you are to be one of the party going with him to General DeKay's," Miss Noble said to Reynolds.

"Yes," he answered, "and I expect a most delightful time. I hope you are going too?"

"Yes, I could not afford to let such an opportunity pass. I have always greatly desired to see something of field sports. I dote on dogs, and I really believe I should like to shoot, and ride after the hounds in a real fox-chase."

"I am glad you are going," he said. "Your enthusiasm will be a great help when birds are scarce or when we shoot poorly. Will there be other ladies?"

"Oh, quite a number, I dare say. There will be one, at least, the dearest, charmingest woman that ever lived. Mrs. Ransom, a widow, but lovely, fascinating, every thing, indeed, that's sweet and interesting. She was married only a few months when her husband died

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—he was killed in a duel or something romantic, several years ago—and she looks like a mere girl now."

Miss Noble was looking directly into Reynolds' face, as she delivered this girlish speech, and she saw something like a shadow flit across his brow and eyes, as if her words had caused him annoyance, but it passed away instantly.

"If you really are fond of dogs," he said, "I shall be proud to show you mine. I fancy I have two that can not be matched in the whole world."

"What sort are they?" she inquired with immediate interest. "You see my father has made me quite a connoisseur; I am away up in dog-knowledge." She held up a little plump hand to show how high her attainments soared.

"Are they pointers, setters or droppers?"

Reynolds laughed. Her outright earnestness of interest in such a subject amused him, whilst it also made him feel justified in pursuing the theme, always a pleasant one to a genuine sportsman.

"One is a pointer, the other a setter," he answered.

"And do they work well together? Do they understand each other's movements, back each other, and all that?" she inquired.

"In the most perfect way imaginable. They are like perfectly drilled soldiers, their minds seem to keep pace exactly."

"Oh, isn't it the most beautiful sight! I know it

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must be. My father has described it to me so often and I am so anxious to see something of it. I don't know why I shouldn't, do you? Mamma rather objects—talks of cruelty to birds, and sneers in her sweet way, at the idea of a young lady caring for field sports. Do you see any wrong in it? I really think I should like to have a gun."

"When I was in India I saw a young lady shoot at a tiger," said Reynolds, "but she missed it."

"And ever since you have kept the incident in mind as proof positive of the modern woman's inefficiency in the field of Diana," she quickly replied.

"Not altogether," he said; "Diana's field was so broad." But Miss Noble was not scholar enough to feel the point of his meaning. She was ready enough, however, and responded:

"Oh, yes, the whole blue heaven to sail across; I had forgotten that her glory, after all, was mostly moonshine."

"We poor men have been unable to forget it since the dreadful fate of Acteon and the drowsy experience of Endymion; but if you will promise not to turn the weapon against me I shall be glad to let you try a beautiful little English twenty-gauge gun of mine when we find the game."

"How good of you," she exclaimed delightedly; "it will be charming. Don't tell mamma, she would ridicule me out of it."

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"Never; I shall die with the secret, if need be. I would not miss seeing you fire your first shot for any thing."

"Now there," she exclaimed, "you can't quite be fair; there was something in your voice that suggested a lack of confidence in my nerve and ability. I shan't shut my eyes and dodge and—and—squeak."

"Of course not," said Reynolds, "I shall expect nothing of the kind. You will kill your bird handsomely, and I shall applaud you and give you *encore* and——"

"If you are going to make fun of me, I shall stay at home," she exclaimed with spirit. "I'm in earnest. I really wish to know how to shoot."

Reynolds' eyes involuntarily ran over the outlines of the girl's fine form and rested for a moment on her animated face. She was indeed in earnest, and she looked a perfect model for a Diana, so far as strength and symmetry went. True her bright, vivacious American face had nothing of the straight-cut Grecian severity of beauty, but it was a brave, self-reliant, earnest face, tinged with healthy blood and beaming with the spirit of girlish enterprise. It needed but a look into her eyes for one to know that she was as pure as a violet, with the charm of an infinite capacity for love hovering like a separate atmosphere about her. She was a woman in nothing but physique. Girlhood of the freshest and charmingest sort was apparent in all that she said and

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did. Reynolds felt her sweet, breeze-like influence pass over him with the effect of a rare fragrance. He gave himself up wholly to her mood. It was like romping in a furtive way, this light, free prattle with one so young, so frank, so childlike and so beautiful.

"Why, if you wish to shoot you shall," he said with smiling earnestness. "I should be glad to show you how. It's quite easy to learn. There's nothing difficult or objectionable in it."

"Oh, do you really mean it? Do you think it quite——proper? I never could see any real impropriety, and somehow I have fancied that I have a genuine passion for it. Perhaps I shall not like it after I have tried it—but, yes I shall, I know I shall. Don't you think so?"

She had a way of opening her eyes wide, as a child does, when asking a question, and she looked straight into his with a simple fearlessness that was far removed from boldness.

"I think you would like any thing that—that—you ought to like," he said.

"I do not like that," she replied naïvely; "it has the ring of flattery. Why do men always do that? Do they think we like it?"

"I don't think you do," he responded, laughing and opening his eyes a little wider in turn. "I really didn't mean flattery, however: I meant to say that you are constituted to enjoy real, rational pastimes and recrea-

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tions, that you have healthy, natural tastes. That is not flattery, I hope."

"You put it in the least objectionable shape, to say the least," she replied, "and I am willing to compromise, remembering your promise about the gun. I have an ambition that I will confide to you." She leaned toward him a little and added: "When I go to Newport next summer I want to be able to tell my friends about shooting quails in Alabama. It will be so much better than their poor mockery of fox-chasing —that's absurd."

"Ah, I begin to understand," said Reynolds. "You may count on me to aid you in every possible way. You shall have most interesting and realistic experiences to relate at the seaside, if you will let me be your guide and teacher. I beg to be your abettor-in-chief."

Mrs. Noble and Moreton approached, just at this point, and the subject was dropped. In fact Moreton at once drew Miss Cordelia away to some other part of the house, and managed to be near her for the rest of the evening. But the girl left with Reynolds something that lingered, diffusing itself throughout his consciousness, with the effect of a mildly exhilarating potion. Strangely enough, the words of Moreton's little song:

"The light of her eyes
And the dew of her lips,
Where the moth never flies
And the bee never sips,"

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had all the evening been tinkling in his ears. Not that Miss Noble had troubled him in the least with any thing like love at first sight. She was not a girl for him to fall in love with; but her gentle, earnest voice, her grace of person and manner, and her half-girlish, half-womanly independence of speech had touched him and quickened in him germs of sympathy he had thought long since dead. He felt old dry wells of feeling bubbling afresh. He was gently moved as if by a subtle change within him. Mrs. Noble found him with this mood upon him, and it lent to his talk its freshness and fascination. She was charmed, and when she was told that for the past six years he had scarcely left the cabin over in the mountains, the touch of mystery did not lessen her interest in him.

Moreton, without thought of what sympathy he might arouse by his peculiarly graphic manner of presenting the subject, described to Miss Cordelia the wild, strange prettiness of Milly White and the pathetic ignorance in which her whole nature seemed steeped.

"Why, how romantic!" she exclaimed, "she must be interesting. She ought to be taught. There may be something well worth developing behind those wonderful, mysterious eyes of that girl."

Cordelia's school days were not yet so far in the past that she had got rid of certain academical theories. She still reveled in the belief that education might make a king of a frog.

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"If she could be taught," said Moreton, in a reflective way; "but I suppose such a thing is impossible. She comes of such vulgar ancestry, ignorance and stupidity are her heritage, don't you know, and she probably has no capacity. Her limitations are set and nothing can broaden them, I fear. But her beauty, if it may be called by that name, is certainly remarkable. I have never seen a more perfect form—petite, lithe as a leopard's and as graceful as a fawn's, and her face has something in it so appealingly and so hopelessly sweet and pure. But then such vacancy, such hideous ignorance."

Cordelia grew interested. Her vivid imagination took quick and strong hold on his sketch of this mountain girl, filling in with its own lines and coloring the spaces he had left.

"Why hasn't Mr. Reynolds taught her?" she exclaimed, with just a trace of deprecation in her voice. "He has been over there so long, living in the same house. It's a shame that he has not directed her mind so as to awaken some———" she stopped short and a little color flushed her cheeks.

"Oh, Reynolds sees nothing of her fine points," Moreton hastened to say without choice of words. "He's a Southerner, don't you know, and considers her poor white trash—that's the phrase here. He thinks it absurd that a gentleman should look at such a girl long enough to form any opinion as to the question of her beauty."

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The conversation was broken in upon and ended at this point by some trivial turn of the evening's happenings, and soon after Reynolds and Moreton took their leave.

They walked toward the hotel, each silently revolving in his mind that part of his experience at the banker's house which had chanced to most deeply impress him. Reynolds, in fact, was scarcely conscious of his companion's presence, so full was he of many other indeterminate but wholly pleasing plans for making Miss Noble happy with his dogs and gun when they should meet at General DeKay's plantation. Moreton had lighted a cigarette and pulled his hat down over his eyes.

"This girl of White's—how old is she, Reynolds?" he presently inquired, in a tone so abrupt that his companion looked up as if startled. "She's scarcely a woman yet, is she?"

Reynolds did not answer promptly, but kept his eyes on Moreton's face while they walked two or three paces.

"Oh, the devil, what do I know or care about her?" he at length said. "You'd better go out and interview her. She seems to have tangled your fancy." The words look brutal, but his voice and manner were merely indifferent and light, with a touch of good-humored raillery.

"She does stay in my head somehow," Moreton frankly replied. "And I confess that it amazes me

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to know that you have never discovered what deuced physical perfection she has. You needn't try to make me believe in your obtuseness, however; I know you too well, don't you know."

Reynolds laughed, and laying his hand on Moreton's arm, said:

"You have happened to see her at some exceptional angle and with an artist's eye. Poor little thing, it is a small measure that fills her life. Hers is a hopeless lot. Let's choose a better subject. Now there's Miss Noble."

Moreton did not respond promptly, but looked rather searchingly at his friend. He almost resented the democratic freedom that linked so readily and intimately the names of Milly White and Cordelia Noble. Presently he said:

"Miss Noble is an exceptional American girl. She has all the naïveté and freshness of the country without any trace of its deuced vulgarity."

"Your long residence of two months in this great country fully equips you for criticism," replied Reynolds with mock gravity.

"I have lived a thousand years in America," was Moreton's response. "Every hour has been a decade. I never felt a genuine sentiment before I came here. You must pardon me if I arrogate to myself the right to speak patronizingly to one who has only been here thirty or thirty-five years."

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"I see how it is," said Reynolds. "The same old story. Another sweetheart. You had four in Paris, three in Rome, two in Geneva, two in ——"

"Oh, come now, none of that," Moreton exclaimed with an impatient gesture. "For once and forever I am in earnest, don't you know. I mean to marry Miss Noble."

"I am heartily glad of it," said Reynolds, grasping his friend's hand. "I cordially congratulate you, Moreton. What a sweet, bright, perfectly natural girl she is! I honor you all the more for your choice."

As they walked on to the hotel, Reynolds was thinking what a fair outcome this marriage would be to Moreton's rather adventuresome bachelor career. He did not dare figure for himself any thing so happy, but his imagination was full of floating, rosy fantasies. formless as yet, but ready to take almost any shape of beauty, grace or passion. He felt a quicker movement of his blood, he breathed deeper, a wider horizon seemed open to him all at once. He dared not try to analyze his state of feeling, lest the test should dissipate it. Like some mere stripling just fallen in love, he heard all through his dreams that night a sweet, strange voice singing that light stanza of Moreton's song:

"The light of her eyes
And the dew of her lips,
Where the moth never flies
And the bee never sips."

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CHAPTER VI.

AT THE GATE.

REYNOLDS started to go on foot to White's cabin among the mountains. His immediate purpose was to arrange for sending his dogs down to Birmingham in a few days, in order that they might be ready for the trip to General DeKay's. He was glad of this excuse for getting away for a time from the town, out into the woods, where he might try to understand himself; for he was in a mood very different from any he had experienced in the last six years, and in fact very different from any he ever before had realized. Since the evening of Mr. Noble's dinner a change had been going on within him. It was as if some reservoir of feeling, hitherto sealed up, had been tapped, from which a rare sensation had diffused itself throughout his being, mildly thrilling his nerves and vaguely firing his blood. He could trace this change to no definite source, nor could he be sure whether it tended toward some new and brighter phase of his variable life, or toward some lurking evil. He felt the pressure of a doubtful presentiment, as all strongly imaginative natures at times do, and in the midst of a vivid sense of pleasure there hovered a dim shadow of dread.

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It was in the twilight following an unusually warm day, that he turned aside from the highway to follow a trail leading over a spur of the mountain on the further side of which stood White's cabin. The stars were already coming out in the soft, southern sky, and a slender moon hung half-way down the west. The air was fragrant with the keen essence of resin and the balsam of pine leaves, but there was scarcely more than a mere breath astir among the frondous groves. He walked rapidly, unconsciously timing his strides to the pulses of his mood. Why would the voice of Miss Noble keep ringing in his ears, and her earnest, honest eyes keep looking straight into his with some almost imperceptible shadow of rebuke in them? And why did the poor little face of Milly White now and again force itself upon his inner vision? He could hardly be called morbidly sensitive, but he had been for so long a time shut away from the finer and sweeter social influences. Somewhat a dreamer, too, as are all persons who dwell apart with nature and art. Since his hermit life began he had been a contributor, under a *nom de plume*, to a number of English and American publications, both as an artist and as a writer, so that he had divided his time between the pleasures of the sportsman and the milder excitements of the provincial magazineist. He had fancied for a long time that he was happy, and that all the fascination of woman's charms had ceased for him. Now as he strode along

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he was loth to admit, even in the secrecy of self-communion, that the old influence was taking hold again with a zest as fresh as it was keen and deep. He stopped at the highest point reached by the sinuous trail and sat down upon a stone. The tall, puffy column of black smoke from the iron furnaces rose slantingly against the line of sky above the valley where the town lay. In another direction, beyond a dusky gulch, some lines of fire were burning along the mountain sides, like the lights of an army camp. He tried to analyze his feelings, but the effort was futile; he got up and went on down to the cabin, his blood tingling as if with wine.

The moon had fallen to the western mountain-tops and was touching a peak with its delicate horn when he reached the rustic gate. Milly was there, as was her wont, to welcome him home.

"I knowed 'at ye'd come," she said, "fur I dremp last night at ye was dead an' 'at's a sign, ye know."

Her face, upturned to his, caught from the faint moonlight, or from some other heavenly reflection, a gleam of peaceful happiness that added something which Reynolds never before had seen there, or if ever he had seen it, it was when, a mere child, she had so faithfully hung over him and tended him through a long and almost fatal illness. The memory of her untiring patience and gentleness, her quick sense of his needs and her silent but evidently deep joy at his final recovery, now suddenly rushed upon him.

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"I've ben a wushin' ye'd come an' I'm so glad!" she murmured, as she opened the gate for him. "Hit air so lonesome when ye'r away."

Her lithe, plump figure was clothed in a clinging gown of cotton stuff and a white kerchief was pinned about her throat. Down over her shoulders in a long, rather thin brush fell her rimpled pale yellow hair. Her cheeks glowed and her lips had on them the dew of innocent and, alas, ignorant maidenhood. A flash of recognition leaped into the mind of Reynolds, though he was scarcely conscious of it, and Milly White's strange beauty was no longer invisible to him.

"Ye ortn't to stay away so long," she added, not in rebuke, but in a low, quavering voice like that of some happy bird. Her mountain dialect, crabbed as it appears in writing, added emphasis to the fresh, half wild tenderness of her tones.

All around the woods and little broken fields were dim and silent. The warm southern stars burned overhead and the fitful balmy air crept past with furtive whispers. The moon slipped down behind the mountain, leaving on the peak a delicate wavering ghost that slowly vanished into the common haze of the night. Reynolds paused in the little gateway and looked down into Milly's lifted shining face. In that instant a tender feeling, a subtle sense of some obscure but immediate draught upon the inner sources of his passionate nature, took complete possession of him. The touching sweet-

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ness of her face, the wild grace of her form, and that charming expression of strength and development, impressed him. He forgot the cabin, the pinched and sapless mountain life and all its empty hopelessness. For the time he saw nothing but Milly as his overstimulated imagination lighted her face and form with the allurements of irresistible beauty. He stooped, and, swiftly folding her in his arms, kissed her passionately.

"Oh!" she cried, her voice slipping with sharp sweetness away through the dusky woods. It was like the quick musical chirp of a glad bird. She clung to him with strong, loving arms.

He let her go presently and said:

"It is late for you to be out; come in now, the night air is beginning to be chilly and you'll catch a cold."

"Oh, no!" she naïvely responded, "let's us stay out yer, they're a smokin' in ther, an' hit's so nice ter be out yer." Her mountain dialect, as filtered through her pure, peculiarly musical voice, lost all its harshness and became a fitting expression of a part of the fascinating enigma of her character. "Ye'v' ben away so long, John, an' sometimes I wus afeared to go ersleep 'cause ye wus gone, an' 'cause I'd dream ye wus dead."

"Well, come in now," he gently urged, drawing the long pale brush of her hair through his hand and passing on into the cabin.

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She looked after him, the smile slowly fading out of her face and giving place to that half-vacant, mildly hopeless expression which it usually wore. She put her rather large but finely chiseled hands on top of her head, with the fingers laced together, and with her elbows extended gazed listlessly at the sky. She felt a vague sense of disappointment blended with a delicious happiness. When Reynolds entered the cabin, White and his wife were leaning over a mere pretense of fire and smoking their pipes, with such abandonment to the luxury that they merely glanced at him as he entered; but mountain politeness overcame the tobacco at last, and they got up, greeting him warmly. He shook hands with them in turn, asking about their health, but declined to sit down, preferring after a few commonplace inquiries, to go into his own room and be alone.

His first sensation on entering his apartment was one of disgust at its rough and uninviting aspect. Indirectly the question was assailing him: why had he ever been content in such a place? A query of this nature may arise in one's mind without any definite form, impressing itself by a sort of implication and indirect reflection from a throng of comparisons involuntarily and almost unconsciously made. Reynolds' nature was intensely virile, his passions powerful and his imagination tropical. It goes with the saying that his feelings and tastes were subject to violent and sud-

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den changes. He usually had, however, perfect self-control and an outward appearance of calmness under the most trying circumstances. But let the check-rein once break and his fiery passions get control of the bit, then nothing that passion demands could escape him. He was aware of this; he knew the need of self-restraint, for at the bottom his was a noble soul, full of self-sacrifice and generous, liberal manliness.

On the floor by his easel lay a scrap of white paper with something scrawled upon it. He picked it up mechanically and saw that Milly had been trying to copy the dog-sketch that still rested on the easel. It was a poor, crude scratch, such as a little child might have accomplished, showing in its stiff, hesitating lines the limitations of the girl's vague notion of art. He smiled at this evidence of the first stirrings of culture in a handful of almost barren soil. Art is forever dropping seeds that germinate under all the exigencies of weather. Few of the shootlets live to show more than a tender point above the surface of the ground, but their number is legion and each spike gives to the air an infinitesimal trace of fragrance which cheers us as we breathe.

While he stood looking at her work, Milly came into the room through a doorway that led from the kitchen. He was still smiling when he looked towards her and said:

"Did you draw this, Milly?"

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She put her hands over her face and leaned against the wall. The light from a large lamp on the table gave to her figure the effect of a strong sketch in charcoal. He noted her attitude with an artist's eye, and with a man's eyes, too. There was a bird-like grace in the droop of her shoulders and in the fine curves of her body and limbs. Her flaxen hair gave forth just a modicum of golden light.

He did not repeat his inquiry. Something in her appearance checked him. All that Moreton had said about her came into his mind with almost startling force. How clearly he felt now the dryad-like strength of her figure, and the infantile purity of her face. She had the soul of a woman, too, for how tenderly she had nursed him.

"Get me my slippers, please, Milly," he presently said, more to break up the situation than with a desire to be served.

She let fall her hands and sprang to obey him, with the noiseless swiftness of a kitten. She fetched his slippers, and also his dressing gown, from a corner of the room. This done she lingered near him for awhile, as if hoping he might need some further help. She would not look straight at him now, but kept her face half turned away, glancing sidewise under her drooping eyelids, one hand fluttering idly about the kerchief at her throat.

Some one lifted the latch of the door leading to the

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room in which White and his wife were smoking. At the first click Milly darted noiselessly into the kitchen. It was White, who hesitatingly thrust his head past the door-post and said :

"I loaded three hunderd carterges fur the twelve-bore gun."

"Load a hundred for the twenty-gauge, if you please," said Reynolds, "two and a half drams of powder and three-quarters of an ounce of number eight shot. Put two wads on the powder, don't forget."

"All right, sir, I air 'quainted wuth jest what ye want. Them shells 'll be fixed up jest to the dot. Ye orter see them air dogs, they shine same like they'd ben 'iled."

"Thank you, I'm glad of that. Good night," said Reynolds, anxious to get back to his thoughts.

White withdrew his head.

Milly, from the shadows of the kitchen, gazed fixedly at Reynolds, as he stood in the mellow light of the lamp.

He was, indeed, a man pleasing to look upon, strong, tall, nobly proportioned, with a grand head and a dark, handsome face. His limbs were long and muscular, his shoulders square and broad, his chest deep, his waist rather slender, his whole bearing that of a man by birth and of right a gentleman, and by reason of health and training an athlete. Say what we may, such a man bears about with him a power of fascination, a magnetism able to work great good or great evil

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or both. He is a flame in which a soul may be warmed or burned up, according to circumstances. A girl of Milly's ignorance and inexperience had nothing to protect her from such danger as his influence might bring. She would have gone unhesitatingly to any length he might have asked, without the slightest thrill of doubt or fear. Hers was not a nature capable of much expansion or improvement. A long line of mountain ancestors had fixed in her the hereditary simpleness, narrowness and mental barrenness of the Sandlapper; but along with these limitations had come the gift of a flower-like beauty of form and face, and a voice sweeter than any bird's. She had come up in a wild, lonely way, running free in wind and sun and rain, quite illiterate, utterly unaware of conventional proprieties, truthful, honest, affectionate, passionate, after a fashion, and as independent as any deer in the woods.

It would not be making the statement too strong to say that Reynolds came to a discovery of her striking beauty as one comes upon those haunting visions of loveliness in one's dreams. Why had he not noticed it before? He was vaguely aware that in some way Cordelia Noble had opened his eyes by stirring up the stagnant fountains of his nature and setting old currents to flowing in his veins. Her light girlish prattle had fallen into his ears with the effect that a shower produces on parched and withered sod, and it had had the charm of bird-songs after a long, dreary winter.

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He remained at the cabin several days before the time came for going to General DeKay's, and it was in some way soothing and restful to have Milly shyly hovering around him. He did not fully realize how deeply he was absorbed in studying her face, her form, her free, wild grace of motion and attitude, and the strange, crude music of her voice. She followed him wherever he went, or at least whenever he would permit it, content to be near him, like some faithful animal. She had always acted thus, but he never had noticed it before.

When at last the time arrived for his departure for General DeKay's, Reynolds rose early in the morning to get ready for the little journey. The DeKay place was down on the Alabama river, near Montgomery, and the company from Birmingham would go by rail to the former city, where General DeKay would have carriages for them. The fact is that Reynolds had no physical preparations to make, these having all been attended to with shrewd faithfulness by White; but there was a sort of indefinable dread, or aversion, or some other objection hovering in his mind in connection with the thought of leaving his retirement, his hermitage, and floating out once more upon the open sea of life. In the early gray of morning he crept silently from the cabin and walked or rather climbed to the mountain top and sat down on a stone with his face to the east. He had spent a restless night,

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indulging, between snatches of unrefreshing sleep, regret, remorse, repentance and other nightmares of conscience. He had almost involuntarily sought this high perch overlooking all the country round, as if expecting to be purified by the soft rare atmosphere and the exhilarating wildness and freshness of the view. The east was all aglow with the wonder of sunrise, whilst the valley wherein Birmingham lay was shrouded in a mottled cloak of coal smoke from the furnaces. The foot-hills, clothed in their bristling pines and ragged scrub-oaks, were softened almost into tenderness by the blueish film hovering over them. A dewy coolness and sweetness came up on the morning wind as if out of the lowest stratum of the valley, in strong contrast with the absolute dryness of the stony mountain top. Slowly the fire of the sunrise increased in the filmy east until the great morning-gate seemed suddenly to fly open with a wide upward flare of flame and long, glowing spears of gold reaching out across the valley and billowy foot-hills. Reynolds was in a condition that demanded solitude, and yet he felt no definite purpose in the mood, no clear reason for desiring to be alone. It filled him with a sudden annoyance when a slight sound caused him to turn and see Milly standing close by, bare-headed and smiling radiantly. He frowned.

"What are you here for, Milly?" he demanded sternly. "Go back immediately."

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The girl did not speak. The light went out of her face and a strange grayness overspread it instead. She turned about with a shrinking motion and walked slowly away down the steep slope of the mountain into the straggling wood. Almost immediately Reynolds felt how brutal his act had been and regretted it, hated himself for it. He arose as if to follow her, but faltered and hesitated, allowing his eyes to wander over the grand mountain landscape now flooded with the full light of the sun. What sort of change was this that was coming into his life? Something like a warning shadow had fallen into his soul, and yet some sweet foreboding was with it, some tender, subtle charm luring him with a deep and sweet fascination. He stood a while gazing dreamily, but seeing nothing, then, shaking himself as one freeing himself from slumber, he walked rapidly in the direction taken by Milly. Half way down the slope in a shadowy clump of dwarf pines he found the girl sitting on an old log, her face buried in her hands, sobbing bitterly. He stopped close to her and stood for a moment looking at her. How pitiful a picture she made, with her drooping little form, almost covered by the thin gold veil of bright disheveled hair, outlined against a tangle of broken boughs! He sat down beside her and took one of her wet little hands in his.

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CHAPTER VII.

AN OLD PLANTATION HOUSE.

GENERAL DEKAY'S house was on a slight knoll overlooking in one direction the Alabama river, and a broad stretch of fertile cotton lands, whilst every other view was lost in the dense shadows of semi-tropical woods. The building was wholly wanting in architectural beauty, yet it was picturesque enough, with its wide verandas and tall, heavy, stuccoed columns, its many-gabled roof and huge stack of chimneys. Tall magnolia trees grew about it, vines clambered over it, and its small-paned, many-mullioned windows and open halls, gave it an air of old-fashioned conservatism and hospitality quite in a line with what one has always read and heard of southern country life among the wealthy planters of the Gulf States. Spaciousness was the most marked feature of the building. The rooms were many and large, arranged for the comforts of unlimited light and air. When the windows and doors were all thrown open, a breeze blowing from any quarter flowed through the house with unchecked freedom. The floors were of ash, mostly uncarpeted, and the walls and ceilings

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were heavily paneled with oak. Wide winding stairways and huge fire-places, cumbrous chandeliers and sconces, together with what appeared an over-crowded amount of massive old-time furniture, suggested a formal stateliness rather out of keeping with that freedom of welcome which was and is the distinctive charm of southern hospitality. The mansion had been built and furnished long before the war, in the most prosperous and extravagant days of slavery, when the planter knew no limit to his ability to make and spend and when he set no bound to the number of his guests or the length of their stay under his roof. The dark gray stucco and weather-beaten shingles, together with the old-time arrangement of the doors and windows, gave to the building a very ancient look, as if it might have stood there since a time when men lived as did the old fighting and feasting barons of medieval England. Bucks' antlers hung in the hall, along with heavy rifles and fowling pieces, and a few striking ancestral portraits looked down from the dark walls. It had known much revelry of a thoroughly proper sort, this grand old home of the DeKays, and its inmates, for several generations, had exerted a marked influence in the social and political affairs of the state. The present owner had been a fighting general in the confederate army and had won by heroic bravery the right to his distinguished military title.

When the party from Birmingham reached this

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charming old house by the river, it was late in the afternoon. Several other guests had already arrived from Montgomery, Pensacola and Mobile. A corps of obsequious and clever negro servants, of both sexes and various ages, were ready to attend all comers. The host, a slender man of middle height, wearing a gray military beard, greeted every body with low bows and profuse words of welcome, whilst his rather stout and altogether good and motherly wife had a way that was welcome itself.

Reynolds and Moreton were given rooms adjoining and connected by a door, their windows looking down a long shining reach of the reed-bordered river. An ideal place to sit and smoke, Moreton thought, as he lighted a cigarette and drew a chair so that he could watch the silvery winged kite sailing about in the distance, its forked tail and small head giving it the effect of a fanciful Japanese design wavering on the background of blue-gray sky. A flock of domestic geese were on the river, floating idly, now and then lifting their wings and flapping them rapidly and screaming in clamorous concert. Wide fields, gently rolling, and distinctly showing the ridged and parallel rows of cotton and corn stalks, swept away almost to the horizon, bounded on one hand by the river, and on the other by a thick wood, where even the deciduous trees still retained a trace of summer greenery. Something in the air suggested the sea, and a sensation, as of extreme

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remoteness and isolation, took possession of Moreton's mind. It was his first experience of life on a low-country plantation. The idyllic simplicity, quietude and serenity impressed him as much as did the stateliness and amplitude. Here was an estate of thousands of acres—many miles in extent—bearing on its surface all the marks of almost primitive modes of husbandry. Worm fences, shallow plowing, the use of hoe and wooden rake; gates with pins and sockets instead of latches, clap-boards instead of shingles and plank, and so on throughout the gamut of bucolic appurtenances long since discarded in thrifty and progressive regions. But beyond all this, there was that indescribable air of isolation from the rest of the world, as if the plantation were an independent self-sufficient hereditament of the DeKays, owing no allegiance to any power outside its boundary lines. No other house, save the small cabins of negro tenants scattered here and there, was visible. The estate was too large to admit of neighbors.

When Moreton and Reynolds went down to the drawing-room they found themselves in the midst of a company composed largely of gentlemen, there being but four ladies besides the hostess. Miss Noble was surrounded by a group of young sportsmen freely discussing hunting and shooting topics, her bright, strong face and Juno form showing at their best. A tall young woman, a Miss Beresford from Montgomery, whose father had been governor of the state—and whose brother, Mr.

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Mallory Beresford, a noted shot, was present—stood near a window in conversation with Mr. Noble and General DeKay. But the most striking group in the room was composed of Mr. Mallory Beresford and two ladies, one a quick-spoken, alert, rather faded looking blonde, whose lips could not cover her irregular teeth, the other a pale, sweet-faced, almost slight young person, whose bearing, though decidedly womanly and dignified, had a girlish charm wholly indescribable. The blonde was speaking in a rapid manner, and her words, sharply accentuated, reached the ears of Reynolds:

"Oh, I am really not a guest," she was saying, "I invited myself. I came to gather material for a letter to our paper. I begged the privilege of General DeKay. A description of a shooting-party on a genuine old Southern plantation is a rare find for a correspondent. I feel that I am in grand luck." Her gestures amounted to gesticulations.

"Ah, Miss Crabb, what journal do you represent?" inquired Mr. Beresford in a voice modulated to the gentlest southern inflections.

"The Ringville *Star*, of Ringville, Indiana. I am the associate editor," she glibly responded.

Reynolds heard this much with his eyes fixed on the face of the other woman whose smile had that rare quality of sweetness suggesting sadness, and whose large, soft blue eyes beamed with a tenderness and truthfulness that seemed in some way touched with

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well repressed trouble. There are faces whose expression will at first sight suggest some secret story of grief or wrong or regret. Sometimes a high order of beauty will, of itself, carry with it, as the flower carries its perfume, a haunting reminder, or half-reminder, of the subtle ways of fate. Reynolds was aware that General DeKay was coming across the room to meet him, but he could not tear his gaze from the young woman's lovely face.

"I haven't presented you to my niece," said the General, taking the young man's arm. "She is really my daughter now, for I have made her my heir. Haven't much left for her to inherit, however, save a good old name."

For a moment Reynolds' hand closed over the warm, dainty fingers extended towards him, and he bowed low before Mrs. Ransom—Agnes Ransom, a name that was soon to become one of thrilling sweetness to him.

"Oh, it's very pleasant, in many ways, to belong to the press," Miss Crabb was saying. "One can go every where and see every thing. The railroads give us free passes and the hotels put our rates to the lowest. For instance, how could I ever have found my way into this delightful house and this charming company, if I hadn't carried the magic of the press with me?" She ended with a rather musical laugh. Her question was one that Beresford dared not attempt to answer, for, in fact, he knew of no other way by which she could have

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gained an entrance to this secluded and exclusive place. It chanced that he knew how the editor of a Montgomery paper had interested himself in Miss Crabb's behalf and begged General DeKay to extend her the privilege of "writing up" the shoot.

"She seems to be an excellent young woman, and then her paper is hopelessly obscure. You needn't fear you will ever hear of it again, unless she sends you a copy," the editor urged, "and I feel a sort of fraternal responsibility for her freedom of the country while she's here. We can't be too tender in our treatment of Northern editors. Whatever we do offensive to the least one of them will be trumpeted to the four winds by them all."

Beresford very much desired to talk with Mrs. Ransom, but the glib representative of the *Star* went on so rapidly that he could find no chance for withdrawing his attention. Then when Reynolds appeared on the scene all hope faded out.

"You are a fine shot, Mr. Beresford, I presume," continued Miss Crabb, "kill birds on the wing?"

"I believe I am a fair shot," he answered, with a true sportsman's faith in the impressiveness of modesty. "I shoot well enough to enjoy the sport."

"I saw Captain Bogardus and Dr. Carver shoot together once," she said, "and it was just lovely. They hit most every time—little glass balls thrown out of a trap. It was extraordinary."

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Reynolds and Mrs. Ransom had moved away. It was a great relief to Beresford when dinner was announced. At any other time he might have been able to bear, and even enjoy Miss Crabb's rapid and versatile conversation, but now that Agnes Ransom was seemingly absorbed in listening to this dark, handsome stranger, he could not keep his wits about him. Miss Crabb had to do all the talking, a thing she did not seem to regard as a hardship.

"There is a veritable ruin near here, I am told," she said, "a picturesque old heap, the remains of a grand mansion, on a bluff by the river. I should very much like to go and see it before I return to Montgomery. Do you know any thing about it?"

"No, I regret that I have not the pleasure. I believe I have never heard of it," he answered. "General DeKay should be able to inform you." And so he conducted her to the host and hastened to another part of the room, conscious of having been guilty of a petty turn.

Moreton had joined the group of which Miss Noble was the light, whilst Reynolds and Mrs. Ransom had found their way to Miss Beresford, whose ultra Southern face and figure were supplemented by conversational graces strikingly suggestive of a social era almost forgotten, save among the most conservative people of the low country. She was tall and dark, with regular features, large, rather expressionless black eyes and straight

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black hair. Mrs. Ransom introduced Reynolds, and then dinner was announced.

"This is a gentlemen's party," Miss Beresford said, on the way to the dining-room, "and it has been arranged that the ladies shall act as waiters, and we beg you not to criticise our methods too severely—we are not perfectly trained to the work."

"One who has been for several years living in the family of a mountaineer, as I have, should not be in a criticising mood," responded Reynolds; "how shall such an one presume to judge whether or no you balance a tray artistically?"

He spoke lightly, but the word mountaineer, as he uttered it, called up with electrical swiftness, a thought that sent a strange thrill through him. A low, pathetically plaintive voice seemed to speak to him in the mountain dialect. He saw a little coarsely-clad form leaning on the gate at White's, with the pale starlight glimmering on its upturned face.

As Miss Beresford had said it was to be, the dinner was served by the ladies, who passed behind the chairs of the gentlemen, flitting nimbly back and forth, receiving the viands from the hands of negro servants at the door of an ante-room, and presenting them to the guests. It was a study worthy of an artist's handling, that ample dining-room, with its curiously carved panels of oak, its antique mahogany side-board, its ponderous brass chandeliers and its high-backed chairs.

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Even Miss Crabb, as she actively busied herself with the part of the duties that fell to her share, showed to picturesquely good effect amidst such foils to her vivacious face and restless energy.

She was, by temperament and education, a person not likely to slight any opportunity of furthering her own plans, no matter how great the breach of small proprieties involved in the act. Even as she brightly and smartly hurried hither and thither around the table, she was thinking of how her experiences and observations here at the DeKay mansion would look in the pages of a certain magazine, if only she could get it accepted, with a number of picturesque, ultra Southern illustrations, and with her name appended in full: Sara Annah Crabb. She imagined the stir such an event would cause in Ringville, where as yet her genius was not especially admired. She nursed a dream of sudden fame quite masculine and muscular, so to speak, which would enable her to get even with the male editors who had so often made sport of her prose and verse and even of her name. She was a good girl, honest, conscientious and full of kindness, but she had had a very hard struggle with life, and she was mightily ambitious. The adroitness with which she now and then slipped from her pocket a little note-book and pencil and the rapidity with which she jotted down certain memoranda of what she saw or heard prevented much notice being given to the

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incivility by either host or guests. Indeed she had a quiet, semi-furtive celerity that, coupled with what may be called an insignificance of manner, neutralized any vulgarity which otherwise would have been observable to an offensive degree. Then, too, she talked so rapidly and volubly that if one looked at her at all one must have been wholly occupied with what her lips were doing. It was a wonder how she could impress one as being a very quiet person and yet be skipping about and talking like that.

She was a revelation to Moreton. She gave him a glimpse of American intellectual life in the crude state exemplified from a feminine standpoint. He had heard of and read of the strong-minded women of the western continent, but here was the first instance that had come within his view. Strange to say, he rather liked her. Her freedom was racy of the West, the breezy, broad, grassy, fertile West, where, as he imagined, the buffaloes ventured into the outskirts of the cities and where the men took their guns with them to church. Perhaps he did not imagine this, after all, but the spirit of it was in his thoughts. She seemed to him a fair exponent of society molded by such surrounding. He felt with æsthetic nicety how, turning from Miss Crabb's harmless inquisitiveness, *chic* and crude vim, the lines of feminine force and beauty, by comparison, were graded through a thousand changes to reach such perfection as he perceived in

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Miss Noble. He even found himself chivalrously attacking providence for showing such a difference in bestowing gifts upon the two girls. Why should Miss Crabb be so tall and angular and sallow, so lacking in the lines of grace, so sharp-voiced and ugly? Why could she not have been rich, at least? Poor girl! she must carry so much while Miss Noble had beauty, health, grace, riches.

The windows were open, allowing a gentle ripple of air through the room, charged with a woodsy freshness and that grateful balm always present on warm winter evenings in the south. Once when Mrs. Ransom leaned over Reynolds' shoulder in performing some needed service, the loose end of a simple ribbon at her throat was blown lightly against his cheek and he caught the merest waft of violet perfume from the flowers on her breast. It was a slight thing, but it was to him the sweetest part of the dinner.

Women appear to be little aware, as a rule, of the powerful influence they may wield over men by their sweet negative qualities as well as by their sweet positive ones. For instance, the absence of a high harsh voice is next in value to the presence of a gentle and low one. A quiet, modest shyness of manner may be apparent from the total absence of any angular self-assertion rather than from the actual existence of the manner itself. Hence it is that most women who fancy themselves strikingly attractive to men, are really quite

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the reverse, whilst it is often the case that the shy, sensitive woman who shrinks from self-display, wins admiration from the other sex without possessing any positive qualities especially charming. With the approach of Mrs. Ransom, a half-formed sense of satisfaction and subtle delight crept into Reynolds' bosom, as if with the fragrance of the flowers she wore he breathed in a rarer and more precious element exhaled by her own flower-like nature. It is good for a man to be able to keep undulled his susceptibleness to such delicate influences, for thereby his nature enriches and sweetens itself. The crucial test of virility of the highest order is that of its sensitiveness to the finest and purest demands of woman's nature. The man's soul has lost its morning freshness whose nerves do not tingle response to the least touch of the most ethereal breath of feminine sweetness, sincerity and beauty, and he is a brute who pauses to trace his susceptibility to some gross origin.

"It is quite charming to dine under such ministration," said Reynolds, while receiving some delicate dish from the steady little hand, "but I should——"

"No," she interrupted with a grave, sweet smile, "do not say the rest. We think it quite fitting. My uncle at first refused to have any ladies included in the party; but I insisted on having one or two of my dearest friends, and it is agreed that we are not to be considered as forming any part of the company."

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She passed on, without giving him any chance for further words. Beresford, who sat opposite, begrudged every syllable she had uttered.

All around the table the conversation was of field sports, adventures with dog and gun and prospects for the morrow's shooting. General DeKay and Mr. Noble, as veterans, led the discussions, the banker giving fluent and graphic accounts of his experiences in the Maine and Michigan woods, the General responding with racy bits of adventure in the game regions of Louisiana and Florida. Men who like field sports are, as a rule, earnest, healthy, vivacious fellows, fond of good cheer, with a decided leaning towards making the best of every thing. Such company as that around the board at the DeKay mansion, was, therefore, one to enjoy to the full the superb feast and all its attendant freedom from formality. The ladies retired when the cigars came in, leaving General DeKay and Mr. Noble to test some old brandy, while the younger men sipped a milder beverage, under the white wreaths of Cuban tobacco smoke. Two or three negro men-servants had quickly cleared the table, and now moved noiselessly about, or stood like white-aproned ebon statues, gazing thirstily upon the sparkling glasses.

Meanwhile the ladies were having their own pleasant dinner in the breakfast room, Miss Crabb entertaining them with a vivid account of some of her experiences as a correspondent and editor. Her sketches had a

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breadth and freedom, all the more fascinating to the Southern part of her audience, on account of the impressions they gave of a field of woman's labor unknown in the dreamy land of cotton and sugar-cane, magnolias and mocking-birds. Miss Crabb was very earnest and sincere, deeply impressed with the importance and influence of her profession, and her straight forward manner of talking, along with a perfectly evident good-heartedness, won a peculiarly qualified admiration and respect from the majority of her listeners. Her effect with Miss Noble was quite different. The shrewd, wide-awake Northern girl knew very well how purely a matter of business Miss Crabb was making of the whole affair, and how like a dissecting-knife her pen would be. She sympathized with the young journalist, however, and silently hoped that she might make a success of her bold effort to penetrate to the inner heart of this old, exclusive Southern social circle, the picturesque charm of which seemed to hover like an atmosphere in the quaint, dingy, airy room.

All the doors and windows were open and the night breathed through the house, bearing the pungency of the men's tobacco in faint traces to the breakfast room, and presently the sound of a banjo along with the mellow, barbaric voice of a negro singer, filled the place. There was almost uproarious applause from many manly mouths. Uncle Mono was ending up the feast with his favorite song:

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"De raccoon am a cunnin' ting,
He rammel in de dahk,
Wid nuffin' 'tall fo' to 'stu'b he mind,
Tell he yer my 'coon-dog bahk!"

He was a jolly-faced, jet black old fellow, with a great shock of grizzly wool on his head, a comically flexible mouth, and dusky eyes that danced to the rapid time of his music.

It was the merest chance that suggested Uncle Mono and his banjo, but if it had been pre-arranged, as in a play, that his two or three humorous songs and his one pathetic love-ditty should close the evening's festivities, it would have been in accord with the highest art. The almost rude yet wholly fascinating carvings on the time-stained panels of the dining-room, seemed to especially favor the effect of such lyrical savageness and grotesquerie.

The impression upon Moreton's mind was strange, almost weird. When all was over and he was alone in his room, he leaned back in a chair, with his feet thrust out of the open window, and gazed into the soft sky with a haunting sense of how suddenly and far he had been removed from the glare and show and polite tumult of his own world. It was all very fascinating, this isolation and decay, these soft-tongued women, these knightly, half-grave, half-hilarious men, this strain of music from Dahomey.

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CHAPTER VIII.

WITH DOG AND GUN.

"A westerly wind and a cloudy sky,
Proclaim it a hunting morning,"

SANG some one of the merry sportsmen, as the dogs were loosed in a gently rolling field, where, on one hand, the stiff, straggling rows of dry cotton stalks ran down to the river bank, and on the other a dreary fallow plat, overgrown with yellow sedge and clumps of bushes, spread away to a dense wood. There was, in fact, a gentle breeze from the west, and a thin veil of fleece clouds covered the sky. The morning appeared propitious, every one was in high spirits.

The ladies, in an ample spring wagon, had been driven to an elevated point whence they could have a sweeping view of the grounds to be shot over. A field glass or two had been furnished them, so that distance need not trouble their observations.

The men, in a long line and distant from each other not less than twenty yards, walked slowly with the dogs running to and fro ahead of them.

The morning was balmy and warm, but not hot, with just a hint of dampness in the air. Along the

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river a low-hanging line of gray fog was slowly fading away.

The ladies alighted from the wagon, with the help of the colored driver, and disposed themselves in picturesque attitudes, their broad hats thrown back and the wind fluttering their ribbons. Miss Noble and Miss Crabb were the most interested, the latter making swift notes in a little red book.

Reynolds had quite forgotten his promise to Miss Noble about teaching her how to shoot. He had, in fact, forgotten her as well. Moreton was on one side of him, Beresford on the other. He felt the responsibility of having to shoot between too such marksmen; but he was also keenly alive to the opportunity it would give him for a display of his finest abilities as a sportsman. He had resolved to lead the field if possible and he could scarcely have told why. Mrs. Ransom had said something just before starting about Beresford being considered the best shot present. This may have served as a stimulus. She had not meant to be overheard by any gentleman of the party, her words being for Miss Crabb's ear; but Reynolds did hear. Her voice had a way of getting to him, as if it sought him of its own account. It was a very sweet and musical voice, suggesting a reserve of strength and depth, with just a suspicion in it of that vague sadness which lurked in her face.

Some hampers containing luncheon had been

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deposited under a tree by a little spring near where the ladies were posted, and here, at the sound of a horn blown by the negro attendant, all were to come at high noon.

The shooting began early, the first birds being pointed by one of General DeKay's dogs. It was a fine strong bevy, flushed in a weedy swale. Mr. Noble and the General both fired right and left, getting but one bird each. The dogs dropped to shot and the game, well scattered, was marked down in some low sedge two hundred yards further on. Two of the dogs were now sent to retrieve the dead birds, which was scarcely done when another covey was flushed by some of the party, the birds taking almost the same flight as the first. This was enough to warm the blood in any sportsman's veins. The dogs fairly trembled with eagerness. The line was lengthened, the shooters getting further apart so as to cover a wide territory. Beresford's pointer was first to stand, Reynolds' setter, a noble dog, promptly backing, and two birds were flushed. It was a fine chance for a double shot, but Beresford missed with his first barrel and killed with his second. Reynolds cut down the missed bird with his right and killed another that flushed in front of him with his left. The shooting was now begun in earnest, Beresford making a very difficult double a few steps farther on, whilst Moreton distinguished himself by three straight misses. General DeKay and Mr. Noble

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were apparently the most excited men in the field. The banker was too ready, shooting as soon as his bird showed above cover, and the General was rather slow, poking his gun after his game until it had flown out of certain range.

As fresh bevies were flushed and the birds scattered themselves over a wide area, the sportsmen became separated, or hunted in twos and threes.

Miss Noble and Miss Crabb watched this eager skirmish line through their glasses, keeping up, meantime, a running discussion of the incidents as they occurred, with true feminine lapses, now and then, into criticism of whatever chanced to offend their notions of how a shoot should be conducted.

"I hope Mr. Reynolds will get outrageously beaten," exclaimed Miss Noble, "I really do."

"Why?" asked the editor.

"Because I do," was the response so perfectly intelligible and satisfactory to all women.

"Oh," said Miss Crabb, "you have a grudge, have you?"

"He promised me he would teach me how to shoot," Cordelia laughingly responded, "and, like all men, he has not kept his word."

"There! did you see that?" cried Miss Crabb still intently surveying the distant shooters.

"No, what was it?"

"Mr. Reynolds killed a bird that Mr. Beresford had

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missed and then turned and killed one that the English gentleman—what's his name?—had failed on! It was lovely—I like that!"

"Mr. Moreton appears not to be having good luck," said Cordelia, "but I fancy he's quite as good a shot as any of them. My father says that any one will have unlucky days, no matter how good a shot he may be."

"Mr. Reynolds hasn't missed yet, so far as I have observed," said Miss Crabb. "There went down two more birds before his gun. I think he has the best dog of any of them: it seems to know just what he wants."

"How is my brother succeeding?" inquired Miss Beresford from her seat on a wagon-cushion which she had laid on the ground and covered with a gay shawl.

"Very finely, indeed," was Miss Crabb's ready response. "The honors seem to lie between him and Mr. Reynolds. They easily lead the rest."

"My brother never has been beaten, I believe," Miss Beresford went on. "He is said to be the best shot in the state."

"Begging your pardon," Miss Crabb responded, "it really looks as if Mr. Reynolds would beat; he hasn't missed a shot yet, and I don't think he's going to."

Miss Beresford smiled rather incredulously, as if her faith in her brother's superiority could not so easily be shaken.

"But they are all getting so far away that I can not

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be sure any longer," continued the observant editor in an apologizing tone.

Mrs. Ransom was seated some distance apart from the rest, busying herself with pinning a wreath of bay leaves from material gathered off some small trees by the spring.

The firing, scattered far and wide, came to the ears of these listeners, softened down to a mere desultory booming, with now and then the quick repetition that told of a double shot. Even Miss Crabb ceased her efforts to follow the course of the merry sportsmen. She fell to work at her note-book as if venting a bitter spite upon it and for a time her tongue rested from its almost incessant labors.

Cordelia went to where Mrs. Ransom was busy with the bay leaves and sat down on the dry ground beside her.

"A victor's crown," she said gayly. "So you are going to reward the winner?"

"Oh no, I have been playing little girl. When I was a child I used to make wreaths like this, only I have lost the ready knack I had then."

"It's such a delightful thing to be a little girl," said Cordelia, impulsively laying her hand on Mrs. Ransom's arm and fixing her frank eyes upon her face. "I wish I could have always staid about thirteen—that's the golden age, I think, don't you?"

"I was a very happy little girl," replied Mrs. Ran-

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som. The evasiveness in her voice and the far away look that came for a moment into her large blue eyes, were not observed by Cordelia, who, with a buoyant, retrospective ring in her voice, exclaimed—

"Oh, so was I, ever so happy. There never was any one who had so delightful a time. It was so easy to be happy then."

"You don't look very sad, even now," said Mrs. Ransom, wholly recovering her sweet, half-sad smile.

Cordelia laughed merrily.

"One can't always tell what a world of trouble a face like mine may mask," she replied in her lightest way, but it gave her a real pang the next moment, recollecting Mrs. Ransom's bitter experience. She picked up the wreath, which was now finished, and put it on her head. It gave to her plump, joyous face an air so free, fresh and almost rustic, that one might have mistaken her for a Western farmer's daughter. Mrs. Ransom looked at her for a moment, and then on a sudden impulse, put a hand on either glowing cheek, and drawing her forward, kissed her again and again.

"I hope your dear, sweet face will never be more of a mask than it is now," she said. "You blush as if my kiss had been——"

"Had been sour!" interrupted Cordelia with a ringing laugh.

Meantime the men were having what is called glorious sport. The dogs, now thoroughly warmed with

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their work, were behaving their best. It was a pleasing thing to see them consciously competing with each other, carefully beating back and forth in front of their masters, allowing no spot of ground to go unexamined, promptly standing or backing or dropping to shot, eagerly watching each other's movements and taking quick advantage of every favoring accident of ground-surface or of cover. Each dog took evident delight in seeing a bird, flushed from his point, killed by his master. A missed quail brought as much chagrin to dog as to sportsman.

Some of the party, in following the flight of the bevies, reached a country cut up by shallow ravines and gulches leading down to the river and filled with a dense tangle of small trees and matted vines. Here the shooting was quite difficult and exciting, and both sportsmen and dogs were taxed to the utmost of their skill; for it was impossible to know where a bird would flush or what direction its flight would take. Mr. Noble was peculiarly suited to this sort of thing. He was in his element where the cover was thickest and the swiftest action required. He displayed his nimbleness and readiness to good effect snap-shooting, as the birds whirred out of the dense cover to turn into it again, showing themselves for the merest point of time. He and Reynolds chanced to get together towards noon in a place where to kill a bird required almost electrical quickness. Reynolds rarely refused a shot and always

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killed. His movements did not appear surprisingly swift, but the gun always got to his shoulder in time. He did not snap-shoot, as the word goes: his aim was obtained with the promptness, celerity and certainty of a mechanical effect. Only four times during the sport did he fail to bring down his game, and every bird of fifty shot at was hit. But as a true sportsman, he was ready to yield the palm to the highest achievement, and while he felt a secret satisfaction in knowing that he had beaten Beresford, he took even keener pleasure in the victory of his dog. The noble animal had performed a feat in the presence of Beresford, Mr. Noble, Moreton and General DeKay, that proved him a king of dogs.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars cash for him!" exclaimed the banker excitedly.

The entire party broke forth with hearty applause.

It came about as follows: The dog had been sent into some weeds by Moreton to retrieve a dead bird, which he promptly did. It was as he was returning, with the game in his mouth, and leaping clear above the weed-tops, as was his habit, that he suddenly, at the highest point of a bound, turned his head half about, and stiffened himself in mid-air, on the scent of another bird. He struck the ground standing staunchly, his eyes fixed, his feet slightly spread, his back and tail on a line. The sportsmen could hardly believe it a genuine point; but when the bird was flushed and killed,

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they stood for a moment looking at the sensitive thoroughbred, with that flawless admiration which men reserve for beautiful women and sure-nosed dogs; then they all applauded.

Beresford felt defeated at every point, and in his heart a premonition of failure began to ferment. A few days ago he had met Agnes Ransom at his father's house in Montgomery, and had fallen a prey to her gentle voice and grave, sweet face. Since then she had been constantly in his mind, her influence growing upon him by force of memory, some new grace adding itself to the impression, as each hour recalled a word, a smile or a glance unconsciously treasured by him. Now it all seemed slipping away. It is one of the most natural of mental operations, this swift reaching forward to grasp an evil before it is more than vaguely threatened. We call it foreboding: it may be the last refinement of logic. Beresford kept to himself the rest of the morning, rather gloomily borrowing of the future. Something told him that Agnes Ransom and Reynolds were going to be lovers. His enthusiasm flagged and he shot with less than his usual care. On the contrary, Reynolds seemed to be attended by the god of good luck; every chance seemed to favor him. His self-confidenee never once deserted him. He too was borrowing of the future, and what he borrowed was very sweet. Deep in his heart nestled the precious belief that Mrs. Ransom had involuntarily—nay, uncon-

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sciously—responded to his interest in her. This gave him nerve and alertness and force. When he would flush a bird, the loud hum of its wings and the bullet-like rapidity of its flight did not disturb his thought or his vision. He threw up his gun with a promptness and self-possession that insured a perfect aim. When he fired the result was a thoroughly fine, clean shot, stopping the game dead in mid-air, so that it fell without a flutter. Yet all the time his dream went on.

At about half-past twelve the horn blew loud and long from the place where the ladies had been stationed with the luncheon. Most of the shooters were loth to leave off the exciting sport, even though the stirrings of hunger began to be importunate. The mellow notes of invitation fancifully executed by the negro "bugler" had nothing very insistent in them. It was a long while before the party began to straggle back. Reynolds was first to reach the little grove above the spring near where the ladies had been waiting and watching. He strode swiftly along with his gun across his shoulder, his dogs following at his heels. A small, fancifully twisted tuft of mistletoe that he bore in his left hand was heavy with milk-white berries and waxen green leaves. His broad-brimmed hat was far back on his head, leaving his swarthy face unshaded. He had almost touched Mrs. Ransom before he saw her where she sat under a little pine tree with her hands listlessly crossed in her lap, her head uncovered and her

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dark hair gleaming in strong contrast with the almost colorless fairness of her face. He started perceptibly on discovering her, but a smile came over his face, as he bowed and said:

"A charmingly airy place you have: may I join you? I am really quite tired."

"Certainly, there's ample room," she half-hesitatingly replied, a little color slowly warming her cheeks, "but I believe the luncheon is spread and you must be hungry."

"No, I'd rather rest. The party is scattered in every direction; it will be some time before all are in. What a wide view from here—could you see us shooting?"

"Yes, that is Miss Crabb and Miss Noble could—but really I did not look. It frightens me to see a gun fired. It is a silly weakness that I can't overcome."

He had thrown aside upon the ground his old-fashioned game-bag stuffed with the dead birds, and laid his gun across it. He sat down a little way from her, in a half-reclining position, resting the weight of his heavy shoulders on one elbow.

"I never before saw quails so numerous, I believe," he said, twirling the spray of mistletoe and looking at his favorite dog which had crouched panting before him. "We have had a fine morning's shoot."

"I am very glad. My uncle would have been so disappointed if you had failed to find birds," she responded, her voice, so sweet, so peculiarly artless and tender.

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"He is a fervent sportsman," she continued, "and sets great store by his annual shooting party. Last year the rain interfered and he was terribly put out about it."

"He certainly knows how to manage an affair like this," Reynolds said. "I never saw any thing so perfectly planned and executed. We found the birds at once and have been shooting ever since. Nothing could have been better."

He carelessly took up her hat, which lay within easy reach of him, and thrust the stem of the mistletoe spray behind the broad band of ribbon that encircled the crown. It was a cold looking cluster.

"Not a bad bit of decoration, is it?" he smilingly inquired. "It is the most peculiar and beautiful sprig of mistletoe I ever saw. See how the smaller stems have grown around each other in fanciful twists."

She made a quick, suddenly-arrested movement, as if to snatch away the frigid-looking winter cluster, then glancing up into his face, simply said:

"The hat is not of a kind to bear much embellishment."

He appeared not to hear her. In fact he did not hear her, or if he did it was merely her voice, not her words. The relaxation from the physical exercise and mental excitement of the sport was so sweetly supplemented by the influence of Mrs. Ransom's gentle presence that he fell into a mood as dreamy and

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tender as the air and sunshine around him. Some vague stimulus was affecting his nerves and blood, suffusing his brain with a happiness as precious as it was undefinable. Like the effect of rare wine, this sudden mood seemed to be connected in some way with evil, as if it were too delicious not to have some after-taste of the hidden poison it contained. He knew and he did not know what it was that, like a skulking serpent, shadowy and hideously menacing on account of its uncertain proportions as well as on account of its venomous nature, darted now and again through his dream. Mrs. Ransom, as if in some way touched with the subtile essence of his mood, looked at him and felt a little premonition of some new experience in store for her. At this moment she and Reynolds were as detached from all the rest of the world as if they had been the only inhabitants of an undiscovered island. They were aware of this and for a few moments reveled in the fascination of the experience. Somewhere in the conscience of each an ill-defined protest against the future stirred uneasily.

Reynolds was first to recover himself. Clearing his mind, as if with a wave of the hand, he held the hat towards her with a careless movement.

"Put it on and let me see how it will look," he said. "I pride myself in my ability to trim hats."

If she had a mind to be offended she quickly changed. His smile was so frank and his eyes so bold and honest

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that it was impossible for her to suspect him or to refuse his light request. But she could not keep a pink flush from rising into her cheeks, and her lips glowed like cherries. He looked calmly at her for a moment, then in a perfectly earnest way said:

"I like it, it becomes you: please let it stay, will you? You are lovely when you look like that."

His eyes were fixed upon hers with a deep and tender meaning. Despite herself her heart leaped violently and she grew pale. In her confusion she arose. He saw the change come over her face and sprang hastily to his feet.

"I hope I have not offended you, you are not——" he earnestly began.

She interrupted him with a little laugh.

"Nothing so serious as that," she lightly exclaimed, waving one fair hand. "It is time for us to be looking after the luncheon."

She stooped and patted the head of one of the dogs. The rest of the sportsmen came straggling up the incline from the fields, one of them singing a gay hunting carol.

Reynolds picked up his bag and gun. There was a glow in his eyes and a hot tingle in his veins. He looked at the lithe, graceful form, and sweet, earnest face of the young woman, as at an inestimable treasure. The flush had returned to her cheeks and lips, though she had struggled hard to overcome this incomprehensible emotion.

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"Why can't we stay here a little longer?" he asked, almost with vehemence. "I was enjoying it so much. There's no dire necessity for going, just at this moment, is there?"

She fixed her eyes on his for a second, then lowered them and turned half away. It was a mere glance, a flash, but it was an involuntary confession that she understood his feelings and did not dare to give them opportunity. What further meaning it conveyed he could only wish he knew.

"Yonder is uncle," she murmured. "Poor old man, I know he's tired!" and she almost ran to meet General DeKay.

Reynolds watched her go tripping down the gentle slope, through the stunted wire grass and tufts of sedge, wearing on her hat his spray of mistletoe. She looked like a mere girl, slim and *svelt*, whose movements were as light and free as the wind. She had won over his dog and it trotted away beside her, looking up into her face. He felt his heart throbbing heavily, and something like a tender mist gathered in his eyes. An almost uncontrollable desire to go swiftly after her and clasp her in his arms took possession of him. Would he ever get so near her again? Would she ever again give him a look like that which was now pictured so vividly in his memory? Ah, those serious, tender, earnest eyes, that low, gentle, haunting voice! Would those sweet, half-sad lips ever meet his with a kiss of

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unquenchable love? He stood there actually trembling with the stress of his suddenly-generated emotions, an underglow of passion showing in his bronzed face.

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CHAPTER IX.

LUNCHEON AL FRESCO.

IT is one of the distinctive features of life in our Southern States, this keen pursuit and enjoyment of field sports. The climate favors every thing of the sort, and the tastes of the people, as well as the leisure which has always been their inheritance, keep alive a zest for out-door accomplishments, amongst which shooting is accorded the chief place. It has sometimes been hinted that, so zealous are they in this direction, if small game chances to be scarce, they will on occasion shoot at each other, in order not to fail of diligent practice; but no man who has ever enjoyed the cordial hospitality and generous freedom of a low-country plantation in the quail season, will be likely to recall any but the charmingest recollections of the occasion. The open season for small game comes there in the most delightful part of the year, when to be out of doors is, of itself, as exhilarating as a surf-bath in summer. From the old, wide-winged, airy plantation house and its profuse cheer and comfort, one goes forth into fields, basking in more than Indian-summer dreaminess and warmth. The air is fresh and pungent, the

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ground is dry, the prospect is liberal and inviting. There is no sense of limitation to the rambler's operations; he feels that, like the poet's brook, he can go on forever.

By gentlemen of robust tastes, such entertainment as that afforded by General DeKay's shooting-party is of a kind greatly enjoyed and rarely obtainable. The game had been carefully preserved and the shooting area was practically unlimited, which, without the aid of perfect weather and a rare hospitality, would have made the mere liberty to shoot joy enough for the enthusiastic sportsmen. But General DeKay and his wife knew how to entertain in that off-hand, natural way which is peculiarly gratifying to men bent on such vigorous pleasures as field-sports give. Substantial viands, good wine, fine tobacco and freedom from conventional absurdities around the board were supplemented by such cordial watchfulness of their needs as made the guests feel "at home" indeed.

The luncheon spread on a smooth plat by the spring and presided over by Mrs. Ransom was discussed in no mincing mood by the quail-shooters, while they talked over the excellent sport of the morning with frequent eulogies of their host's superior manner of planning and directing it.

Reynolds' shooting was heartily praised, and Ruby, his dog, got such eloquent tributes as never before fell to an unsuspecting setter. Miss Crabb could not

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refrain from openly making notes, nor could she repress a desire to ask questions. She was embarrassed with the riches of material that fell about her. She had visions of a letter that should make both her and her paper famous.

Physically as well as mentally, Miss Crabb was in strong contrast with the rest of the company; her voice, too, her pronunciation, her method of intonation, and, indeed, all the salients of her personality, cut with an almost barbaric *eclat* through this smooth social atmosphere. At every turn she made herself felt as a foreign quantity. She was obviously busy; she had a purpose, an ulterior object; she was plying a trade, and a trade, by the way, of which she was very proud. So nearly as words may express it, she was pleasingly disagreeable. Her companions were aware that she aroused in them a dual sentiment wherein pity was scarcely separated from a low grade of admiration. That she was a novice in newspaper work could be detected by the most unskillful observer, and like all novices, she was an enthusiast. Evidently she regarded gathering notes as the chief purpose of life for which she would make any sacrifice. She was nervous and fussy, quick, keen, ready, anxious to make every thing serve her a turn. Hearing the gentlemen discussing the interesting features of the morning's sport, she plied them with such a volley of questions as taxed their agility to answer. Meantime

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her pencil danced recklessly over the pages of the little red book. The prospect of doing something unique intoxicated her and made her enunciation still more rapid. Reynolds' shooting and the splendid achievement of his dog were to be the chief points of her report and she spared no pains to get the details in full. She looked upon men and men's doings as of much more importance and interest than women and women's acts; she was not quite sure that even dogs were not rated by the world as rather more noticeable than women. Secretly she harbored an ambition to show the world what a woman could do if once she had got clear of the meshes of feminine restraints. Why shouldn't she report a quail-shoot just as well as a man? At all events, she was bound to try, and so she went nimbly at the task.

"It's unusual, isn't it?" she inquired of Mr. Tom Boardman, a merry youth just graduated from a Tennessee college, and brim full of sport-lingo, "It's unusual, isn't it, for a dog to stiffen in the air on a point with a bird in its mouth?"

She said this all so glibly and earnestly, with a slight sideways turn of her head, that the youth came near choking over his effort to smother a wild laugh.

"Very unusual," he answered in a suffering tone, "very."

She made some rapid notes in the red book. Then

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looking up, with the end of the pencil against her teeth, said:

"And he struck the ground, stanch on his nose, at a half-turn; is that right?"

Mr. Tom Boardman's eyes suddenly widened and then his nerve failed him. He laughed uproariously in spite of himself; but to his great relief Miss Crabb did not take offense. She joined him quite heartily in his merriment at her own expense.

"It's very interesting," she added, "and I must get it right. Give it to me slowly in technical language, so that I can take it down. I guess I got some of the terms mixed—absurdly, too, didn't I?"

He caught a glimpse, so to speak, of the girl's charming kindness of heart and evident sincerity of purpose, which instantly won upon him. He changed without appearing to change and took great pains to give her the information she desired, volunteering besides to detail a number of the most striking incidents of the morning.

"Why shouldn't you try writing a novel and weave into it something of this sort?" he asked. "It seems to me that you might make a lively story of such materials as you are gathering."

"And if I should write one," she answered, her face growing serious, "I couldn't get it printed."

"Why?"

"Oh, the publishers don't want provincial stories, they are not in vogue now."

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"Ah, well, but make it so fresh and true to life and so breezy and interesting generally, that the publishers couldn't refuse. I know you could."

"That's a kind compliment, but I'm too well posted to be carried away. A novel, now-a-days, must be what they call analytical, a fine-spun exemplification of an author's power to lay bare the motives of his characters in doing what they do. Plots are abolished, stories ignored."

"But I like stories, genuine love-stories, with a smack of adventure and lots of incidents," he earnestly exclaimed. "What's the interest in all this long-drawn, tedious nonsense about a common-place American young woman's reasons for refusing an English nobleman, or about why a European patrician of doubtful morals could not condescend to marry a good, free, sweet American girl?"

Miss Crabb smiled and shook her head.

"But the critics have decided against you, and what are you going to do about it? I, too, like stories, and so, I think, does almost every body, but they are out of fashion. All the thrifty writers go in for the analytical novel now. It don't make much difference what your characters do, so that you are able to dissect their motives for so doing."

She sighed regretfully as she ended, as if the subject had awakened sad memories.

"Well, if I were a critic," said he, with a light laugh,

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"I'd give your story a genuine indorsement of authority."

"No, you wouldn't," she responded. "You're a man and you'd do as the rest. You'd say: Poor girl, she'd better be washing dishes or teaching school."

Boardman laughed.

Beresford saw the mistletoe spray in Mrs. Ransom's hat, and, not dreaming of any one else than herself having put it there, asked where she had got it.

"Mr. Reynolds brought it from somewhere in his rambles this morning," she said. She took off her hat and plucked out the sprig, but after hesitating a moment, put it back again.

Beresford received the blow bravely, and, like the true gentleman that he was, accepted the situation without apparent embarrassment. Love at first sight is a fruit of warm climates, and passionate souls seize it rapturously; but love, even under a Southern sky, sometimes turns to ashes before the swiftest lips may reach it.

"Mr. Reynolds has won the victory to-day," he said, "and under the ancient rules has the right to choose where he will have the crown rest. You wear it like a queen."

There was something behind his light manner and lighter words that touched her. She did not rightly construe him, guessing that he was simply striving to hide the chagrin of his first defeat in the field.

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"Victor to-day, vanquished to-morrow," was her quick rejoinder; "there is a good deal of mere chance in such things, I suppose. No doubt to-day was one of your unlucky days."

"Yes, but I must admit that I never have equaled Mr. Reynolds' score of this morning, so I can not get any comfort out of your gracious suggestion," he frankly exclaimed. "He is a better shot than I—the best I ever saw."

"My uncle says so too," she responded, "and he is enthusiastic about the dog, the one that did the fine act."

"Superb, superb!" he rejoined with emphasis. "I would put that dog against the whole world of dogs." He found a sort of comfort in praising his rival and his rival's dog. It was a species of self-torture that deadened for the time the pain of his defeat.

Miss Beresford, who was so situated that she could not avoid hearing this conversation, glanced at her brother with a repressed resentment in her eyes. She felt that he was not doing himself justice; that he was, in fact, failing to assert himself as a true Beresford, a name that had never before tamely accepted and acknowledged defeat.

"Give me your score, Mr. Beresford, please," said Miss Crabb, coming forward with her book and pencil.

"Thirty-three," he promptly answered. His sister's face flushed with anger. She turned to him and said under her breath:

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"She shall not do that — she shall not publish it!"

"Pshaw!" he almost whispered, "don't allow yourself to show any feeling. Don't make a scene. Can't you feel the delicacy of my situation? Be quiet, there's a good girl."

Miss Crabb had hurried away to where Reynolds was seated. She was intent upon getting the precise status of things.

"Oh, you are way ahead," she exclaimed, in her clear high tones. Then she seized the wreath of bay leaves twined by Mrs. Ransom and forthwith laid it upon his head.

"To the victor belongs the crown!" she added, laughing merrily. "See, Mrs. Ransom, I've put your handiwork to noble use!"

She was so innocently playful in her manner, that no one could deem her act a rude one. It seemed almost fitting, at least permissible, in view of the freedom of this little out-door convocation. But Reynolds lightly doffed the circlet.

"I am too earnest a democrat to wear a crown of any sort with due dignity," he laughingly said; "besides," he added, "my dog is the hero, not I."

"Truth, every word of it!" cried Moreton, balancing a glass of wine on the tips of his fingers. "Your tastes are most commendably plebeian and proper. If Miss Crabb will but let me describe your mountain

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hermitage she can fully appreciate your sturdy democracy.

"Don't do that, Moreton, if you love me; my cabin is my castle and my sanctuary," Reynolds answered in mock earnestness.

It was an unlucky turn in the thoughtless conversation, for it sent a current of uneasiness through the mind of Reynolds that made it very hard for him to keep up his spirits to the level of the occasion. The mere mention of those six years of mountain seclusion was enough to awaken a whole world of distressing memories. Things known only to himself came up to darken his mind. Miss Crabb's restless energy and journalistic enterprise would not, however, allow him long to grope among his carefully hidden secrets.

"Now a thought strikes me," she exclaimed, as if addressing the entire company; "can any one here sketch the least bit in the world? What a fresh and charming illustrated paper the material I am collecting would make for one of the magazines, if I could get some truthful and spirited sketches from which an illustrator could take his cue!" She rolled the end of her pencil in her mouth and awaited an answer.

"Mr. Reynolds is an artist," said Moreton with a sidelong glance at his friend.

"Oh, I'm so glad! Won't you help me, Mr. Reynolds? Just a half dozen or so of striking local transcripts—a view of General DeKay's house, a scene

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or two from the quail shoot, some character studies and——"

"You overwhelm me," said Reynolds, his face actually showing the truth of his assertion. "I never could trust myself to undertake such a commission; and besides," he added with a tone of suddenly discovered relief, "I have no sketching materials with me."

Miss Crabb became thoughtful, tapping her forehead with the back of her note-book. Mrs. Ransom came to the rescue with a request for her to help pass coffee to the gentlemen. The negro attendant had brewed a pot of Java, the aromatic fragrance of which had been for some minutes on the air.

It would, indeed, have been worth while for an artist to have caught the impression of the scene just then. The men carelessly standing or sitting, with the young women ministering and the dogs lounging idly around the outskirts of the group; the soft atmosphere, the broad, airy landscape with the green-fringed silvery river winding through the middle distance, the slumberous quietude and the deep, dark forest rising yonder like a wall.

After coffee the gentlemen went aside to light pipes and cigars. The afternoon was well advanced before General DeKay proposed going to the field again. Now and then a quail had been heard whistling in the distance that far-reaching, energetic call of a straggler to his scattered companions. A momentarily freshen-

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ing breeze was fast brushing from the sky the film of fleece clouds.

The ladies voted that they were satisfied with what they had seen, wished the sportsmen a merry afternoon and were driven back across the rustling sedge fields to the old mansion.

Reynolds turned, after he had walked some distance, and looked back. The wagon containing the ladies was slowly trundling over a little swell in the field. Mrs. Ransom's face was, he thought, turned toward him. Involuntarily he took off his hat and waved it in the air. Then he saw, or imagined he saw, something white flutter a response from the group in the wagon. This little incident cost him quite dear, for he failed to note, on turning about, that his dogs had come to a stand in the weeds near by. A quail sprang up from his very toes and whirred away quartering to his right, going like a bullet. He fired and missed. Moreton took the bird on a cross shot, stopping it beautifully.

Reynolds' dogs looked at him with a sneaking leer in their eyes, as if they felt the disgrace of their master.

"That's one debt paid!" Moreton cried. "Credit me, will you?"

Reynolds felt no interest in the sport. His vision was introverted, his ears were full of sweet sounds, his heart was beating time to the melody of his day-dream. He went down by the river and lay upon an old mossy

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drift log, against one end of which the light current rippled sweetly. There was a windy rustle in the reeds and a broad, washing murmur came from the water. He could see but a little distance along the river surface either way, owing to a short bend, and the tall brakes on the banks shut out all else save an occasional report from the guns of his more enthusiastic companions. His dogs came and lay down near him, licking their muscular legs and glossy sides, or nibbling at an occasional burr in their hair. So all the rest of the afternoon he did not fire a shot. It was nearly sundown when he again climbed up the river-bank and turned towards the house, with not a bird to show for the two or three hours spent with dogs and gun. But what to him were the poor trophies of a quail-shoot, now that his passionate nature was stirred to its depths with a love whose fullness and intensity left no room for another feeling or thought? To be near Agnes Ransom, to hear her voice, to gaze into her eyes, to bring the whole force of his will and the fullest power of his eloquence to bear upon her, to win her, to take her, to triumphantly hold her as his own, these were the desires, the purposes surging about in his breast. He walked slowly back towards the DeKay mansion, taking no heed of the beauties of earth or sky. It was nothing to him that the low-hanging sun flung a glory over the distant wood and touched the roof of the old house as if with a flame.

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CHAPTER X.

MILLY INQUIRES.

ONE day in the time of Reynolds' absence at General DeKay's, White came down to Birmingham in his cart and Milly insisted so strenuously on accompanying him, that she had her way. This led to an adventure of a sort likely to impress itself deeply in the mind of an unsophisticated girl of the mountains. She had given no especial reason for wishing to visit the city, but White shrewdly guessed that her desire to know something of the whereabouts of Reynolds was the motive impelling her to so unusual an undertaking, for heretofore she had always been very averse to going into Birmingham.

When they reached town White gave Milly a pittance of money and said:

"You go ter some store, Milly, an' buy ye some candy er a apple er somethin' er other. When ye git tired er foolin' eround ye kin go back ter the cyart an' stay ther' tell I come."

She took the small pieces of silver without a word and allowed her father to desert her. She suspected that he meant to deceive her and go off to some gam-

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bling den; but she did not care. Her desires all centered in finding Reynolds or hearing something about him.

She strolled about from place to place in the street, innocently staring into men's faces and quite as innocently receiving, without shrinking, such brutal leers and winks as certain of the bejeweled and over-dressed loafers bestowed in return. She went into a store now and then, but, instead of asking for any article of merchandise, she invariably propounded the question:

"I wanted ter ax ef ye hed seed any thing o' John Reynolds 'bout this yer town?"

She spoke with such confiding earnestness of manner and with such an appealing light in her eyes and such music in her voice, that she attracted immediate attention from whomever she addressed. She received respectful answers from the tradesmen. None of them knew any thing about Reynolds, but some of them, touched in a sweet, indefinite way by the inexpressible half-lisp of her childish voice, and feeling the influence of her strange, yearning face and graceful form, tried to draw her into conversation only to discover that she became dumb so soon as she learned that they could not give her what she sought. She turned solemnly away from each one and left him to struggle out of the bewilderment she had unconsciously cast over his mind.

With absolutely no knowledge of the difference

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between a reputable business street and a row of dives, she drifted here and there until finally she met a man whom she at once recognized as Moreton, although in fact he was a drummer for a wholesale liquor house of Atlanta. She placed herself resolutely in his way, as he was about to pass her, and said:

"Air ye the feller 'at come to our house thet day?"

The man, a tall fellow, not unlike Moreton physically, looked down at this pleasing apparition, and for want of better response, said:

"What day?"

"Thet air day 'at hit rained so, an' ye tuck dinner, an' staid all day. Don't ye 'member?"

"Can't recollect you, sis: seems like I ought to though, by George. What's your name?" He took hold of the brim of her coarse hat and lifting it a little peeped under at her face, now suddenly pink with blushing.

"Ye know—I'm Mr. White's girl, up ther' wher' ye fotch the turkeys thet air rainy day."

"Oh, yes, I do recollect mighty well now, certainly. I fetched the turkeys, yes. You are White's girl. I'm real glad to see you. How's the folks?" said he, glibly.

"We're all well," responded Milly. "I wushed to ax ye ef ye've seed John Reynolds lately."

"John Reynolds—John Reynolds, which John Reynolds do you mean?" he inquired, with a deceptive show of having a dozen men of that name in his mind.

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"Hit air Colonel Reynolds, es pap calls 'im, an' he lives at our house, an' ye know ye said he wer' yer bes' frien' an' 'at he wer' a grand feller. Don't ye 'member? Well, I wush to see him."

"Any thing of a furious rush about seeing him right off—eh?" He stooped low enough to look into her strange beautiful eyes. "What do you want to see him about?"

She shrank uneasily and made no answer. Her pink lips quivered slightly, as a flower's petals do when one breathes upon them. The man's breath was foul with the fumes of whisky.

"Oh, if it's private—if it's a secret between you," he resumed, "why, of course, I don't intend to pry in; but as Reynolds and I are chums, I don't see why you won't tell me."

"I wushed to see 'im, that's all," she responded in a plaintive, hesitating voice, putting a finger in her mouth and scraping the toe of one coarse shoe back and forth on the ground.

"Oh, I guess that he's rather keeping sort o' shady from you, just now," said the man with a brutal smile. "He's got him another girl now, he's not caring about seeing you very soon. I know what he's up to."

She shot a quick, almost wild look into his face, stared at him a moment and then slowly inquired:

"What air yer name?"

He actually reddened with confusion, and was at a

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loss what to answer. He saw that she had discovered his deceit.

"I was just joking," he managed to say. "Never mind my jokes. If you'll come with me I'll take you to Reynolds. He's just down here a little ways. Come on, I'll show you."

"Ye'r' not thet man—ye'r'———"

"Oh, that's nothing: I was just fooling with you. Don't get mad. If you get mad you'll not have any luck. Come on if you want to see Reynolds."

Her eyes had assumed a vague, distressed look and her lips quivered again.

"I wush ye'd go tell 'im 'at I wush he'd come on home," she said, glancing uneasily around, as if afraid that some one would approach.

"Guess you'd better go see him and surprise him like. He won't be expecting you. He's just down here a little piece. Come on, if you are going, I can't fool around all day," the man urged, an ugly gleam getting into his eyes and his face showing its coarsest lines.

"John wouldn't like hit ef I'd go ther' wher' he is," she responded. "I hain't got no business a goin' down ther'. I'd be erbleeged ef ye'd tell 'im——"

"Tell him nothing," gruffly rejoined the man. "Come along, it's not far, he'll be all right; he's a good fellow and not going to make any fuss—come on. I'll stand between you and all danger—come on."

"I don't wanter go, an' I haint er goin', an' ye mought

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as well quit er talkin'," she almost doggedly replied, taking a step or two back from him. He followed her with a devilish leer in his eyes.

The street was a disreputable one and there was a narrow alley near where they stood.

"He's not caring any thing about you now; you needn't be so shy, I'm not going to do you any harm. I'm the best friend you've got."

Her strange, troubled face brightened a little.

"Then, ef ye'r' my friend," she quickly said, "go an' tell 'im at I wush he'd please kem home."

The man laughed, looked at her quizzically for a time, and then in a tone, half of vexation and half of amusement, said:

"Well, if you aren't the dangedest curiosity I ever saw! You ought to travel with Barnum."

He gazed at her intently from head to foot, his face softening.

"You've no business trotting around loose in these suburbs," he muttered, more to himself than to her, then quite *solus* he added: "She's cracked: she's an idiot."

Her vague troubled look now appealed to the other side of the man's nature. "Do you know where you are? This is no place for you; where do you live?" He put his inquiries in a voice so different from that half-wheedling, half brutal one hitherto used, that she instantly looked up with a gleam of trust in her eyes.

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"Where is your home?" he continued.

"Over to the tother side o' the mounting, at Mr. White's," she frankly answered.

"Well, what are you doing down here among these saloons and dives? Why don't you go home and stay with your mother? This is a bad place for you."

"I hain't er feared," she said; "I er a goin' down yer ter pap's cyart. Pap an' me we kem ter town tergether. I jist stopped ter ask yer ef ye'd seed John, that wer' all I keered about ye. Ye needn't er be a frettin' yerself 'bout me."

The man chuckled in a puzzled way and walked on, muttering to himself something about the "dangedest prettiest idiot" that he ever saw. He looked back a time or two to watch Milly as she carelessly strolled along, her petite form showing its lithe, wild grace, with every movement and her wisp of yellowish hair shining under her hat and straying down over the back of her loose cotton gown. His eyes had something of the wistful glare with which a cat gazes at an escaped bird.

Milly found her father's cart under a tree in the outskirts of the town, the one kind-eyed, long-horned little ox contentedly ruminating between the rude shafts.

"W'y, ole Ben, air ye tired er waitin'?" she exclaimed, patting the bony little fellow on the shoulder, "we'll be er goin' soon es pap comes, won't we, Ben?"

She climbed into the shallow box of the cart and sat down on its bottom with her head thrown back so that

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she could gaze up through the tree-tops at the bright blue sky. A breeze, cool and sweet, was stealing down from the mountains rustling the few dry leaves that still clung to the branches overhead. She sang, in a thin childish falsetto, snatches of the simple hymn-tunes she had caught from her parents; but she got the words together in a meaningless confusion. Her conception of a song of any sort rose no higher than a consciousness of the pleasing sounds of the voice singing it.

For a long while she waited patiently, now and then glancing down the unkempt street to see if her father had yet come in sight; then she stood up in the cart and looked. It was growing late. The sun was slipping down behind the mountains and a cooler breath crept through the valley.

"Well, Ben, hit air no use er stayin' yer any longer, I 'spec' at pap he air drunk. Git erp ther', Ben!"

She had gathered up the rope guiding line and the gad that lay in the box, and as she finished speaking she tapped the ox and drove away, heading for the road that led homeward. The thought that her father was drunk seemed not to affect her in any way. She soon resumed her singing, and her aimless, wistful gazing at the splendid Southern sky.

It was long after night-fall, but the moon was shining brightly, when Milly drove up to the little front gate at home, and freeing Ben from his yoke and shafts, turned

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him loose to browse on the mountain-side. Her mother met her at the door.

"Wher' air yer pap?" was the laconic inquiry.

"Drunk, I 'spec'," was the answer.

"An' er playin' of keerds," suggested Mrs. White.

"Yes, I 'spec'."

"Well, ef hit air seving up 'at he air a playin' ther' air sense to hit, fer he gin'rally wa'ms their low down gam'lin' hides fer 'em, w'en hit air seving up 'at he plays; but ef he goes in on ter any er them tother games, he'll come home 'ithout ary cent inter his pockets, mind what I tell ye."

"I wush John 'd come home, that's what I wush," murmured Milly, opening the door of Reynolds' room and going in to wander listlessly about among his things. She touched his books, his pencils, his brushes, his pen, and lingered about the easel upon which the dog sketch still rested unfinished.

It was nearly midnight when White came in good-humoredly drunk, boasting of another victory at "seving up with them air gam'lers." His wife had gone to bed, but Milly met him with her usual quiet welcome and the formula expressing her predominant "wush."

"Ye needn't er be 'spectin' the Colonel home for a week, Milly," he said, as he lighted his pipe for a sobering smoke before retiring; "fer he's gone away down on the Al'bam' River to Gen'l DeKay's to a huntin' frolic with banker Noble an' his darter."

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Nothing save the very unusual amount of whisky he had been taking could have induced White to say that and in such a tone. Milly looked at him in a dazed, stupid way, her cherry underlip falling as if from the weight of the information she had received.

"Do he go wuth them air fine folks?" she presently inquired, in a dry, doleful voice.

"Ye'd think so ef ye'd see 'im," he answered. "He air high dinky davy along of the best of 'em, I tell ye. Him an' that feller Moreting what wer' here that rainy day do scoot aroun' with them air silks an' ribbons an' jew'lry alarmin' to the saints."

Milly put her hands together and rested them on her head with their fingers intertwined. She appeared to be considering some troublesome proposition.

"Do ye s'pose them folks 'll make fun of we-uns to 'im?"

White chuckled.

"I don't keer airy dam ef they do," he said, contemptuously snapping his thumb and finger. "Let 'em sail in."

"Well I wush 'at they wouldn't. 'Tain't none er the'r business 'bout how we-uns looks, no how," she quickly replied. She looked over her faded cotton dress as she spoke, with a hurried, dissatisfied glance. She had seen some wonderful dresses in Birmingham.

"No, hit tain't the'r business, thet's a fac', Milly," he responded, ramming his pipe with his finger and

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wagging his head. "'Tain't store clo's, an' jew'ls an' sich 'at meks folks honest an' 'spectable, hits in yer, Milly, in yer," tapping his breast. "We'r' jest as good as any body, hain't we, Milly?"

"Spec' so; dunno," she said, looking dully at him. "I wush he had er staid yer an' kep' away f'om down ther'."

"Hit air p'int blank no use er wushin' thet, Milly," he slowly and firmly declared, "fur he air dead sot onto 'em an' he air a goin' wi' 'em. In fac', he air them sort er folks his own self, he air, Milly."

The girl's eyes slowly brimmed with big tears, and without further words she crept off to bed. White sat and smoked in a gloomy way for a long while, his face showing more than usually gaunt and wrinkled in the dim light of the flickering pine knots on the hearth. He shook his head from time to time, as if dissatisfied with such results as his thoughts produced. Once he spoke out rather fiercely.

"Hit air a dern shame!" he exclaimed, in a voice so fierce and bitter that it awoke his wife. And yet he was too simple-minded to dream of the worst. With the queer pride of the mountaineer, he was viewing the predicament simply from a social standpoint.

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CHAPTER XI.

DALLYING.

THE quail-shoot, after the enthusiastic contest of the first day, abated to a sort of desultory skirmish, each sportsman going into the field as best suited his mood. The weather bred a languor, peculiarly Southern and dreamy, which was aided by the quietude and isolation of the place. The bustle and activity with which the sport had begun became irregularly intermittent. Day after day the sky was serene and cloudless, tinted with that cool, bird-egg blue, tender, delicate, transparent, against which the lines of wood came out with a peculiar semi-tropical effect. Nearly all the time there was a breeze, not the rollicking Northern wind that whisks things about, but a fitful breath that palpitated lazily in the tops of the dull old trees and stirred the vines and plants and dry, thin grass in a fashion wholly indefinite and aimless. It was a luxury to idle around in the shadowy nooks and corners of DeKay Place, where the spirit of old times hovered like a vague, fascinating perfume. Life lost its rough angles here, its outlines softening down to harmonize with the monotonous equipoise of its surroundings. The river had the charm of all low-

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country streams, a warm, slow, lagging motion, a look of lapsing away into some strange, silent, unexplored region; its murmur was a lingering, never quite ended good-by.

To Reynolds those were days of deep and sweet excitement into which now and then darted a pang like a stab in the heart. He was with Agnes Ransom a great deal. Shy and strangely limited in conversation as she was, he yet found her monosyllables and simplest phrases quite enough to hold him to her side. She had not read a great deal of art and literature, she had but fragmentary glimpses of knowledge, her round of life had been confined to a small compass: still she seemed to have gathered a great deal, and a depth rather than a width of experience was in some subtle way suggested by her words and looks.

Moreton was unreservedly happy. Born sportsman as he was, it must have been a genuine old-time love that made him prefer sitting on the veranda or on one of the rustic benches with Miss Noble to following the pointers and setters afield under the cloudless sky and over-warm beams of this waning, low-country winter. He also allowed himself to become interested to a certain extent in the plans of Miss Crabb. From his English point of view, this eager, outspoken, persistent young woman, with her mingled air of freshness, alertness and strangely hindered ambition, was a very novel and interesting study. He recognized and respected

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the worthiness and purity of her aims, whilst he could not keep from regarding her doings with a curiosity little short of that with which he would have observed the gambols of a rare species of monkey. He had not been long enough in America to become indifferent to the oddities and sharp salients of American character and our social contrasts and discords, nor had his tastes resigned themselves to such breezy, democratic familiarity as Miss Crabb insisted upon; but he was a good hater of shams, and her genuineness appealed to him in its spirit if not in its manner. He walked with her an hour back and forth on one of the long verandas, scarcely aware how much he was promising when he agreed to make some sketches for her. He had been, as the reader knows, an art-student once, but had lacked either talent or industry or both, getting on no further than to become a clever sketcher. Miss Crabb told him all she knew touching every subject she could think of, even going so far as to give the details of the distressing tragic circumstances under which Mrs. Ransom had been made a widow. It was a sad story of a mere girl marrying a handsome, dashing, rather reckless youth, who led her a romantic life for a time and finally deserted her, going away to Texas where he had been killed in a street fight with a desperado at San Antonio. Such stories were rather common in the South at one time. The first decade after the close of the war was, in the Gulf

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States, one of humiliation, nervousness, doubt—a decade that soured and vitiated many young lives, making almost outlaws of youths who, under a milder influence would have been good citizens, or at least, harmless ones. Sudden poverty, the stagnation of agriculture and trade, the ebbing of all commercial tides, the swift leveling of social eminences, and the desperation that followed dire defeat, were supplemented and aggravated by political annoyances of the most grievous nature. But the one demoralizing element most active and potent was the prejudice, deep-seated and woven into the very tissues of the Southern youth, against gaining a livelihood by manual labor in plebeian employments. Of course it is no wonder that this prejudice existed, indeed it would have been amazing if it had not existed; but the result was the destruction of many young men who really had in them the qualities that go, under ordinary circumstances, to make up valuable citizens.

Herbert Ransom came of an honorable and once wealthy family at Pensacola, Florida. He was one of what has been rather familiarly termed the "first crop of young men since the war," which means that during the war he was too young to be a soldier, and became a man soon after its close. He was bright, handsome, vain, unprincipled, and yet he passed current in society and married Agnes DeKay, a beautiful girl scarcely sixteen, whose father, a brother of General DeKay, was

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very poor, very proud and very old. For a time the young people lived a sweet, idyllic sort of life on an old plantation near Mariana, Florida; but Ransom's restless, rollicking nature would not be confined to mere domestic quietude. He tried speculation in cotton with just enough success to lead him swiftly to financial ruin. The plantation was sold at a great sacrifice and Agnes had to return to her father, while Ransom went to western Texas with the avowed purpose of looking after some wild lands belonging to his father's estate, but really with no hope of ever again seeing his wife. He had been gone nearly a year when the news of his tragic death in a street fight in San Antonio reached his relations in Pensacola. Soon after this Agnes' parents died and she was left with an income barely sufficient to support her. She had no children, and, with a widowed aunt, she lived in the old family homestead at Pensacola, until General DeKay came and persuaded her to become his adopted daughter. This meager outline of what seemed to Moreton a most pathetic story, fell glibly from the lips of Miss Crabb, along with sundry shrewd strictures upon social laws that render women so powerless to struggle with adversity and neglect.

"When a woman gets married," she observed, "she becomes helpless. She plunges into the gulf of matrimony with a mill-stone at her neck, so that she may be sure to disappear utterly. If she ever again comes

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to the surface it is but to air troubles for which there is no cure."

"If that is the case," said Moreton, "if I were a woman I should try and not marry."

Miss Crabb laughed.

"Oh, I presume there will always be a majority of fools among us," she replied. "Silly girls and restless spinsters, ready to be martyred for the mere romance of the thing; but you know, as well as I, that this is an awfully one-sided world."

"Yes, but you women make it so, don't you know, by decoying us over to your side, thus destroying the equilibrium. If we were the antipodes of each other, now, this would be a gloriously balanced world! All the sorrow-making material on one side and all the joy-bringers on the other!"

"You are like the rest—you won't condescend to sensibly argue a question with a woman. You must go off into badinage, as if a woman could not understand and enjoy cogent reasoning. I don't like insincerity, Mr. Moreton."

"I beg a thousand pardons," he exclaimed. "I did not mean to be insincere—indeed, Miss Crabb, I was under the impression that I was making myself quite entertaining, don't you know, I ——"

She laughed again, a clear, honest, prairie laugh, throwing back her head and holding up one hand as if to ward off something.

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"Oh, it's the same thing over and over. Wherever I go men look upon me as a sort of monstrosity at large by some accident, because I travel alone, just as a man may, and because I attend to my business, just as a man does. It's really funny sometimes; I overhear what they say. They comment on me. 'A cheeky old girl,' 'a newspaper crank,' 'a stiff-minded female,' and 'a meddling nuisance,' are the delicate and friendly epithets applied to me by men. One fellow at the Cincinnati convention called me 'a bag of gimlets' to my face."

"But then your absolute knowledge that the man was mistaken must have ruined the point of his remark," said Moreton. "Conscious innocence is an impenetrable shield."

She looked up at him with a flash of momentary anger in her eyes, then laughing again she said:

"Oh, go on, I'm used to it, and, besides, I can't afford to quarrel with you until I have your sketches in hand; you *must* make the sketches, Mr. Moreton: they will be invaluable to me. I want to get on in literature, and the only way in which I can do that is to get into the great illustrated magazines: they are the highways to fame." There was a hungry, almost greedy ring to her voice, as if her longing for literary recognition were rooted in her heart. Moreton fancied that her lips quivered as she spoke. Her manner touched his sympathy.

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"You'll get on fast enough, Miss Crabb," he quickly said; "your energy and persistence and your capacity for work will take you through, never fear." It was the best he could think of, though he felt its utter inadequacy to her fancied needs. As he looked down upon her his rather heavy, thoroughly English face wore a very kindly expression.

"But you don't know, Mr. Moreton, you can't imagine what a hard time I have; how many ugly obstacles men put in my way, simply because I am a woman. I don't see why they do, but they do. It's awful sometimes."

"They are brutes, they ought to be punched, don't you know," he blurted; "they deserve no recognition by gentlemen."

"Yes, but they *do* get recognition," she replied, half-mournfully. "They drink and smoke and swear themselves into prominence in every walk of life—into fame, fortune, and——"

"Oh, not so bad as that, I hope," he interposed. "Don't be discouraged. George Eliot and Georges Sand and——"

"They are not American women," she interrupted in turn, "and they have never tried editing a country newspaper or writing for a New York magazine. They were rich, or had influential friends, or made people believe they were men."

"Well, suppose you try adopting a masculine pseudonym, you might——"

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"Never!" she exclaimed, with a little stamp of the foot. "Never! I shall win my way as a woman or not at all."

Moreton was beginning to comprehend, in a measure, the really pathetic hopelessness of Miss Crabb's intellectual predicament. To his mind she appeared a heroine with a self-imposed task quite as great as that of Joan of Arc. Like Joan, she must at last be man's victim. He could see the stake set and the fagots heaped for her already. It now seemed a mighty blessing of providence that she was not beautiful, that she was positively ugly and not at all likely to attract men. He had the English admiration for pluck and he felt a great desire to help her; but there was no way. Evidently she did not possess any genius and was only gifted with a shrewd, quick mind and a hungry imagination. She was mistaking notoriety for just fame and was deluding herself with the belief that her burning desire for success was proof positive of her power to succeed. Nevertheless her attitude was heroic and he wished her a better fate than was sure to befall her.

"But you must not commit the folly of setting yourself against men," he presently said, his voice taking on a persuasive tone; "you must recognize their power and the necessity of winning their confidence and help."

"I have tried that turn," she replied with a short

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laugh that had a ring of derision in it, "and it's no use. A woman must have beauty before she can influence men. All the wisdom of Minerva could not have compassed what Cleopatra's——"

"Hold," cried Moreton, with an affectation of lightness which he did not feel, "you are slandering my sex, or, at least, I am an exception. Not that I don't admit the power of beauty, but you put the rule too savagely, don't you know. Why, you really frighten me with your suggestion of masculine depravity!"

She laughed and changed the subject. They continued walking to and fro and chatting in a broken way with the sough of the wind and the swash of the river filling up the spaces.

"Some day," she said, recurring to the subject always uppermost in her mind, and turning to leave him, "some day my ship will come in."

Moreton breathed freer when she was gone. Her state of ferment, of restless effort, tired him.

Two or three hours later when he and Reynolds sat by a window of the latter's room, smoking cigars, he said:

"Miss Crabb told me something a while ago that surprised and touched me."

"Well, what was it?" inquired Reynolds, gazing dreamily out into the brilliant, moonlit night. He had just been for an hour talking with Mrs. Ransom and was now mentally going over again every word of

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the charming conversation. He was in love, he knew it, and was reveling in the luxury of it. Her sweet face and low, rich voice, her quiet grace of manner, her slender, supple form and that indescribable, mysterious half-sadness in her eyes and smile, had fired his imagination and filled his blood with a gentle tumult. Never before had the moon and stars and the grand expanse of heaven looked so lovely to him; never had the world seemed so good; never had life seemed so precious. Being in love is a trite thing, and may be going out of fashion, but it is worth experiencing once, at least, in every lifetime, as a test of the imagination, if for nothing else.

"She gave me an account of Mrs. Ransom's troubles," said Moreton. "It seems that hers has been a rather rough cruise."

Reynolds clamped his cigar between his teeth and looked up.

"I know, I know," he said, in a half-impatient voice. "Her husband deserted her."

"And was murdered out on the Texas border," added Moreton.

"Murdered," said Reynolds, as if weighing the word. "There has been a great deal of that sort of thing in Texas."

"In this instance," Moreton went on, "I fancy that the murder was all for the best. Poor little woman, how she must have suffered under such treatment as

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that young villain gave her. Pity that all such fellows don't go to Texas and get a hole bored through them!"

Reynolds smoked quite rapidly for a few seconds, with his eyelids nearly shut together, a barely perceptible grayish pallor spreading over his cheeks. Presently, in an even and steady, but very strange voice, he said:

"She is a lovely little woman, Moreton, a sweet, warm-hearted, true and noble little woman. I love her, Moreton. I'm going to marry her, if I can."

"Good!" exclaimed Moreton. "I'm glad to hear that. She will just suit you, make you a charming wife. I hope you'll find your way clear, old fellow."

For a time they both were silent, each thinking of his own love, and gazing out into the almost blue-black depths of the star-sprinkled sky. A gentle swashing sound came from the river along with the fragrance of pine-needles and the odor of turpentine. Somewhere, seemingly at a vast distance, an owl now and then laughed, as if from a sepulcher.

"My way seems clear enough," Reynolds at last said, "if I can understand her; but she is an elusive little woman, shy and incomprehensible at times."

Moreton laughed.

"They all are that way—it's a part of woman's nature to be inexplicable, don't you know, deuced inexplicable. Now there's that Miss Crabb: I never

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saw such an enigma. She's a man and a woman and a little school-girl, all in one."

Reynolds got up from his chair and began walking to and fro, his head thrown back, his hands clasped behind him. He frowned and pressed his lips over his cigar so that deep furrows came on each side of his mouth.

"Being in love appears to render you gloomy," Moreton lightly exclaimed, as he glanced into his friend's face. "Love is like wine, it makes some men surly whilst it makes others merry. Now I ——"

Reynolds waved his hand impatiently and said almost abruptly:

"If she really loved her husband, in the first place, it must have been a dreadful ordeal she went through."

"Oh, she must have been very young, scarcely more than a child," said Moreton, as if hurrying to relieve Reynolds, if he could; "and I should think she has outgrown it in a great degree, by this time. She seems quite cheerful and in superb health."

Reynolds turned as he came near the middle of the room, and facing Moreton, appeared on the point of saying some momentous thing. A gloomy cloud of excitement had settled on his countenance. His lips faltered at the point of speech, and with a strange smile he resumed his pacing to and fro. Moreton's eyes followed him with a look of puzzled interest.

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Presently he laughed outright and exclaimed chaffingly:

"You make me think of that little girl of White's when you look like that, Reynolds. Your eyes are for all the world like hers, with those mysterious sad shadows in them. What the deuce is the matter?"

Reynolds' countenance changed abruptly; he essayed to laugh, but there was no sincerity in the effort. He shook his head and answered:

"My head is all in a whirl and I believe I am excited; but you must remember that I am hard hit and awfully in earnest." His attempt at making light of his show of feeling was not more successful than his laughter had been. He saw that Moreton felt its hollowness, and he made haste to add: "It has always been thus with me. I am a creature of extremes, a straw in the currents of passion."

From Moreton's rather phlegmatic point of view, this excitement was something inexplicable. He saw no reasonable cause for it in the situation, and his mind at once reverted to certain indications of a secret trouble observable in Reynolds ever since their first meeting in Birmingham. Naturally enough the rather strange home chosen by Reynolds amid the sterile mountains and among the rude, uninteresting mountaineers, came up to emphasize Moreton's suspicion that all was not well with his friend.

"What especial current of passion is tossing you

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just now, to render you so restless and moody?" Moreton demanded. "One would think you were meditating something as dark as suicide or assassination."

"Oh, I'm all right; I don't mean to do any thing diabolical, I'm too happy for that; give me another cigar, mine are locked up in my bag." He pulled himself together as he spoke, and laughed in a way so careless and natural that Moreton felt a sense of disappointment at having inwardly to acknowledge himself baffled, if not mistaken.

They smoked and talked until late, enjoying the lulling coolness of the night air coming in at the open windows. Reynolds was exceedingly cheerful, and when they separated for the night he said:

"If you have as sweet dreams as I expect to indulge in to-night, tell me in the morning, will you? Good night."

But Moreton, who slept lightly, awoke now and then, and heard him walking to and fro all the rest of the night.

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CHAPTER XII.

A BIT OF LOVE MAKING.

THE party at General DeKay's broke up gradually, some of the sportsmen going away on the morning of the day following the quail shoot, the rest taking their departure in groups or singly, as business necessitated or a sense of propriety dictated. At last the Nobles, the Beresfords, Miss Crabb, Reynolds and Moreton were the favored remnant, lingering at the old plantation to enjoy, as long as possible, the sweets of its almost arcadian life.

Notwithstanding the great change wrought by the war, the DeKays had been able to hold on to a picturesque residuum of their former wealth and to keep up a fair show of that hospitality which had once been almost unlimited. The guests of the mansion felt the perfect freedom given them, and so the days went by without a circumstance to hinder their enjoyment of every moment.

Uncle Mono was a source of great amusement to every body; his banjo, his songs, his stories, his peculiar philosophy and that individuality of thought and expression, so often exhibited by old negroes, making him especially interesting to Moreton and Miss Crabb.

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His life had been so saturated with slavery's influences that freedom, coming to him after he had passed the meridian of life, had not been able to change him much.

Along with his other gifts, Uncle Mono was a fortune-teller whose fame held the admiration and the awe of all the negroes at highest strain. He could tell when it was going to rain and when the wind was going to change as well as he could predict the kind of sweetheart the future would bring to the inquiring youth or maiden. In fact he was the seventh son of a seventh son, and not a drop of white-man's blood ran in his veins.

"I's pyo' blood dahky f'om away back," he was fond of saying. "None yo' yaller niggah 'bout me. Nuffin' I 'spises mo' 'n one o' dese yer no' 'count clay-faced merlatters. Steal! Dey des steal de sole of 'm yo' shoes! No sah, I's pyo' blood dahky."

Sometimes, when the evening air chanced to be warm enough, the guests and the household would assemble on one of the wide verandas and send for Uncle Mono to play for them while the gentlemen smoked their pipes and cigars and the ladies promenaded back and forth to the brisk tinkling of the banjo. They all enjoyed the touch of old-time custom when a number of the plantation negroes, young and old, crept up to within a respectful distance, looking on and listening.

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The nights were superb, the splendor of stars or moon and sky adding an almost weird sheen to the gray fields and silvery river. The pronounced atmosphere of isolation which broods over all those large low-country plantations gave to the guests at DeKay Place a comforting sense of liberty, as if the restraints of conventional life had been dissolved and dissipated, or had never come here.

Some swings had been made of huge muscadine vines brought from the woods and suspended from the trees on the lawn. The young women, especially Miss Noble and Miss Crabb, found swinging most exhilarating sport. Moreton watched Cordelia as she oscillated, like a gay pendulum, in the soft night-light under the dusky boughs, until his heart timed its beating with her movements. He enjoyed every phase of this delightful subtropical episode in his life. It did him good to see Reynolds returning to something like his old-time youthful enthusiasm and cheerfulness.

Among them all it was silently noted how Mrs. Ransom and Reynolds were drawn towards each other.

"Dunno 'bout dat big, dahk young ge'man flyin' roun' de young missus no how," muttered Uncle Mono to his colored companions; "seem lak mebbe she better look sha'p 'bout 'im. He sort o' 'sterious lookin' young man anyhow."

Miss Crabb for some reason failed to win favor with the negroes. She was very much interested in them

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and tried hard to study them; but her inquiring manner and insistent tones of voice did not touch their warm African hearts. On the other hand, Miss Noble was a prime favorite with them all.

"Bress dat sweet chile," said Uncle Mono, "she jes' lak de ripe peach on de eend ob a limb, she sort o' glimmer an' look too good fo' to pull off an' too ripe fo' to let erlone."

"Dat same lak what de young boss f'om way off fink, I 'spec," ventured a colored listener. "He look at 'er 'mazin' sof' an' hongry lak."

"Wha' yo' know 'bout it?" stormed Uncle Mono. "Wha' business yo' got fo' to be a watchin' dem whi' folks? Fust ting yo' know yo' git yo' backbone wa'med up wid a stick! Better not be peekin' 'roun', *I* tell yo'."

"Ef yo' lak what yo' call peekin'," replied the other, with a comical grin, "jes' cas' yo' eye on dat young leddy dat's got de leetle book an' pencil; *she* kin' peek fo' de Lor' sake!"

Miss Crabb was pretty well aware of the delicacy of her situation, or, to put it fairly, the indelicacy of it; but she had gone too far to retreat. She must brave it through to the end.

It chanced that Moreton discovered Miss Noble's pique at Reynolds because of his neglect to fulfill his promise to teach her the art of handling a gun. This gave him a most excellent excuse for offering himself as her instructor. He borrowed Reynolds' little gun

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and made the most of his opportunities. His patience was unbounded and Miss Noble's zeal unflagging, so that between them they squandered a great deal of time down on a little open plat between the house and the river, banging away at an improvised target. As for Reynolds, his promise to Miss Noble was entirely forgotten by him. His love for Agnes Ransom had crowded every lighter thing from his consciousness. General DeKay and Mr. Noble remained faithful to the object of the occasion, pursuing the birds with dogs and guns each day with unremitting ardor. Young Beresford and his sister, after a most commendable effort to stem, with a show of good natured indifference, the tide setting against the passion of one and the pride of the other, went away, taking with them, much against their will, the unflagging Miss Crabb, whose pencil had filled the little red book with pothook notes of what she had seen and heard.

Miss Crabb had failed, however, to get any sketches from Moreton. He had, at last, begged her to release him from the obligation of his hasty promise.

"I did not think," he said to her; "I did not once think of the—the—the propriety of the thing, don't you know, when we were talking about it; but it would offend every one here. These people are peculiarly exclusive—very proud people, Miss Crabb, and they would take it as a gross breach of hospitality. I am very sorry, and I hope you will not—not——"

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"Oh, no, certainly, I see," she exclaimed, in confused haste. "It's all right, Mr. Beresford—Moreton I mean, it's all right, I assure you; but do you think they'll care for my writing them up? I don't see how I can afford to waste all this material. It'll work up so charmingly."

"I don't pretend to advise as to that," Moreton evasively answered. "You needn't send them any copy of your paper. It takes any thing new a century to get here, if it isn't especially sent. Use your own good editorial judgment, Miss Crabb."

"Yes, of course," she responded, thoughtfully adjusting her gloves, "it is a matter of business, a matter of bread and butter with me. I must make every edge cut." She was silent for a moment. Presently she looked up quickly and keenly, adding in a thin voice: "If one writes for the public one must write what is of interest. One can't afford to stand on small proprieties. I can't, at least: I'm poor."

Moreton had ready no response. He felt an impulse toward putting his hand into his pocket to give her some money; but of course he did not do it. Never before had a look conveyed to him so sudden a discovery of the hard lines of the life of a woman who is thrown upon her own resources for earning a livelihood. It suggested to him a phase of human struggle hitherto quite shut out of his imagination, however familiar to Americans.

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"Well, good-by," she presently said, with an almost cheerful smile. "I wish I could stay here always: this is pretty near my ideal of what a home should be." She cast a slow glance around her, letting her eyes linger on the picturesque old mansion and its embowering trees. Moreton fancied that her face betrayed a feeling of weariness and failure, as if her enthusiasm had suddenly vanished.

"Good-by, Miss Crabb, I wish you great success," he responded, cordially taking her hand. It was the best he could do.

"Thank you," she quickly replied. "I am determined to deserve success, at least; but it is a long way off, I sometimes fear." She turned to go to the waiting carriage, but faced him again and added: "This has been a most charming experience to me. What a sweet, restful life it must be living here. I almost envy—I almost covet Mrs. Ransom's lot. I have had such a hard——," but she did not finish the sentence. "Good-by," she repeated, and went away.

Moreton felt a pang of sympathy for this poor girl, though he had no very definite idea of what her struggles, her hopes and her failures might be. It was enough for him to know that she was good and honest and earnest, and that she felt the hardship of some galling limitations.

"Will she ever come to any thing? Is there really any chance for a person like her in this country?" he

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inquired of Miss Noble a little later, as he sat by her side on a rustic seat under some trees by the river.

"She may make a hit, as it is termed," was the answer. "Some of them do, and then, if she will make the most of it, she may get to where life is easier; but at best she can not hope for much."

"It seems queer and pitiful to me," he said, after a moment of thoughtfulness, "that so good and kind a girl as she evidently is should have to do such things. Her situation has deeply touched me."

"That is because you haven't been used to it. Young ladies probably do not report for the press in England," replied Cordelia. "It is a very common thing for them to do it here."

Moreton smiled, as one who gives up a sentiment rather reluctantly is apt to do, and said:

"Still I would rather not see it; she appeared out of place, somehow."

"She was quite out of place here; but she has become so used to overcoming such obstacles that she easily evaded any sense of the impropriety of invading the privacy of General DeKay's ——"

"No, I beg your pardon," hastily spoke up Moreton. "You do her wrong. She *did* feel very keenly that she was *de trop*, that she wasn't just free and welcome, don't you know. I saw it—she almost acknowledged it to me, in fact, and I felt downright sorry for her."

"Poor thing!" exclaimed Cordelia, her voice soften-

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ing with the sudden change in her quick sympathy. "Poor girl! and we didn't try to help her or to make her feel easy. I hate myself for it. I see how mean I have been. It would have been so easy to have smoothed things for her, too!"

Moreton felt a temptation to seize this warm-hearted, impulsive girl and press her close to his breast. Indeed he had a right to be sorely tempted, for she was a strong, lithe, blooming maiden, whose steadfast honesty and purity glowed in her eyes and on her lips. Then there was the dreamy sunshine and the checkered shade and the softly rippling breeze to add to his mood, and yonder was the slumberous river lapsing away between its brakes. But he satisfied himself with simply looking at her and allowing her beauty to freshen and sweeten his heart.

"I suppose it is selfish and narrow," he presently said; "but I am heartily glad that all of them are gone —that we are left alone together, aren't you?"

She laughed, but she blushed as well, and looked away from him as she answered in what she meant for a very careless tone:

"Oh, I like company and bright talk and the excitement of numbers; it exhilarates me. This will be a dull old place, now that the party has dwindled down to four or five. I hope my father has almost run the gamut of his cartridges."

"Not a dull place," he said with a peculiar emphasis,

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"a dreamy, fascinating place, rather. The river yonder, see how it glimmers, and this breeze; I never was so happy at any place as I am here and now. There is a sort of mystery in the influence of things around us."

She looked at him with a quick inquiry in her clear eyes, as if to discover whether or not he was jesting. Something in his bold yet tender gaze parried her glance and her lids dropped. She drooped her head and shoulders a little, too, as if under some suddenly imposed burden.

"Aren't you very happy here?" he went on, leaning a little toward her. "I want you to be very happy."

"Oh, yes, I'm always happy. I never was unhappy in my life," she answered with a show of vehemence, instead of the careless lightness that she intended should appear. "I'm never serious enough to become sad."

Moreton looked at her with tender fervor, the power of love full upon him, and yet the silly rhyme kept ringing in his brain:

"The light of her eyes,
And the dew of her lips,
Where the moth never flies
And the bee never sips."

Truly love-making has all of human nature in it, from the grandeur of extreme exaltation down to the mere piping of sheerest nonsense; but the nonsense for the time, is just as sweet as any part, so much does it

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borrow of the rapture of the occasion. There is comedy of a slender sort in it, which it seems a sacrilege to separate from the sacred part, and yet we all are tempted into poking quiet fun at the big, strong men who awkwardly dabble in love's sweet stream. So few of them can come boldly down to the current and at once arrest it and have their will of it outright.

"What would you do if you were poor, like Miss Crabb, and had to face the world and struggle for life?" he asked with an absurd inconsequence in his manner and voice.

"I can't imagine such a thing," she quickly answered, "I really can't. It would be very, very hard, no doubt. But I sometimes think I might be of more use, that my life is quite empty of real value. I shouldn't know how to do any useful thing."

"You might make some one happy. That would be good."

"I have no knack; I am selfish, frivolous, intent upon my own happiness," she said, looking up with a bright smile.

"Just a word, sometimes, is better than any other alms," he continued.

"Eleemosynary cheerfulness and breath of charity, as our good minister is fond of calling it," she responded with a gay little laugh. "I do sometimes try to be agreeable and bright, just to please people."

"That's mere social clap-trap, it doesn't mean any

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thing. It must be genuine, don't you know—come right out from the heart. You must really desire to make some one happy."

There was something in the vehemence of his voice and manner that caused her to look into his eyes with a quick change from her careless levity to a puzzled gravity of expression, that would have amused a disinterested observer.

"How much would you do to make me very happy?" he went on, speaking as if the question might be one of life and death. "You would like to make me happy, wouldn't you?"

"Why do you ask that—what——" Her eyes had drooped and she made an unavailing effort to lift them again to his face. Here was his opportunity.

"Because I love you, love you better than all the world, Cordelia," came his hurried response. His arms made a quick initial movement, instantly arrested, for the place was not just suited to any violent demonstrations; then he added, breathlessly:

"Do you love me, Cordelia?"

She glanced rapidly around, as if expecting to find in the landscape some relief from the embarrassment that flooded her cheeks with blushes. Just then, Reynolds and Mrs. Ransom passed down the pathway leading from the mansion to a little landing on the river, where a small boat lay moored. They were too much absorbed in conversation to notice the lovers,

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though they could almost have touched them as they went by. Miss Noble remained silent, watching Reynolds assist his graceful companion into the boat and draw in the little painter. Suddenly she looked up and very demurely said:

"They're going for a row on the river: why didn't we think of that? I delight in going out on the water."

"You would take a profound delight in any thing just now that would help you to avoid answering my question, wouldn't you?" he grumbled. "You've forgotten what it was I inquired about, haven't you?"

She laughed in a low, clear way. Reynolds and Mrs. Ransom, lightly startled by the sound, turned their faces quickly and waved a greeting, as they glided out upon the placid stream. They appeared very happy.

"I shall not be put aside so lightly," he went on; "I can't bear it. You must answer me, Cordelia."

"Answer you what?"

He sprang to his feet, and stood gazing down at her with his face actually pale with emotion.

"You don't mean it? You can't mean to drive me from you in this way?" he cried, his voice a little husky.

"Sit down, do, they're looking at us—they'll know what it is," she murmured, making a deprecatory gesture with her hand.

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He obeyed, saying rather ungraciously as he did so:

"What if they do know? We needn't care, they're no better. Reynolds is nearly crazy about her; he means to propose to her as soon as they're round the curve." He could not help laughing a little at his own absurdity. But Cordelia pretended to pout.

"You should not say such things about Agnes; she doesn't deserve your levity."

"I didn't say any harm of her," he hastened to reply. "I spoke of Reynolds: he is very much in love. You do not blame him for thinking a great deal of her—I don't blame him at all. I think it is deuced clever of him, don't you know."

She rose as if to go away.

"Come, now, turn about is fair: you made me sit down again when I got up," he said, catching her hand and gently pulling her down beside him.

What further was said between them has never been gathered from the sweet wind that bore their fragmentary murmurings away among the old trees and down the silvery windings of the river. I presume that, no matter how much the circumstances of courtship may differ, true love, in the hey-day of youth, or in the vigorous prime of life, has certain constant quantities by which it may readily be known; and one of these is so sweet that, to one not personally interested, it narrowly misses being entirely too sweet for deliberate discus-

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sion. John Ruskin has, I believe, more than suggested an amendment to the ordinary methods of love-making, but lovers seem inclined to follow the old, familiar rose-scented plan, no matter how silly it may appear to superannuated philosophers and art critics.

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CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE RUIN.

REYNOLDS had been shut away from society for so long a time that he had returned, in a degree, to the susceptibility and receptivity of extreme youth. We grow like what we contemplate, is a very trite truth, and he had absorbed much of the outright simplicity of the mountaineers, without losing any of the character he had long ago formed. Self-knowledge may be very valuable, but self-study does not tend always toward happiness. One might almost venture to say that, in a vast majority of cases, serious self-analysis amounts to remorse if nothing worse. Moreover, one usually chooses solitude in which to erect one's furnace and laboratory of self-criticism, where one may make the heat as high and protracted as one pleases. The result is usually a mass of unsightly slag instead of the fine and precious metal one has hoped to turn out. Hence it is that a hermit returning to the world after years of seclusion and self-delusion finds it a paradise when he had expected to see it a hell. Men and women are so much purer and stronger and nobler than he had pictured them, and all the

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ways of human social life are so much sweeter and fresher than his diseased brain had remembered them to be, that he sloughs his crust, like a serpent, and comes out a new man.

The doctrine that evil experiences are ever of value, or rather that a baptism in sin ever worked a positive good to the recipient, is too dangerous to be received; but it sometimes appears that there is an annealing influence exerted on character by the intense heat of uncontrollable passions, tempering it at last to the highest degree of sensitiveness and susceptibility. Reynolds was aware, in a vague way, of the change so rapidly going on within him. It was as if his nature were putting forth a tremendous spurt of power with which to eject from its tissue the evil of the old life. What a mystery there is in remorse and repentance and reform! But how much greater the mystery of evil, that terrible, invisible acid, combining with all the bases of human nature and disintegrating every crystal of beauty! How shall the stream of a life, once defiled, be purified? The simplest reagent will disclose the presence of sin, but what process will eliminate it?

The Hand that made the mirror must remove the spots of tarnish.

Love is always the gateway of a new life. When its purple mists and its wafts of heavenly perfumes come upon its victim his whole nature feels as if the ultimate

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sources of impulse had been cleansed, sweetened and electrified. New needs, new aspirations, fresh hopes and the dewy vigor of morning leap into the heart. Ah, then how bitter is the memory of misdeeds! Just then if Satan would get behind and forever disappear, what a relief! What a joy if all the past could be wiped out, as with a sponge, and existence be left to date from the advent of love!

The meeting of Reynolds and Mrs. Ransom was much more than the ordinary contact of life with life, whereby the spark of passion is generated; it was significant of a blending of their past experiences as well as of the creation of a new life for both. Even on the instant when a mutual interest was awakened, their minds flashed back over the past. No doubt love ought to be prospective always; but it can not often be so.

Agnes Ransom could not realize that she was a widow. It was more as if a very sweet romance of her experience had ended in sorrow and disappointment. She looked back upon the short space of her wedded life with a vision dimmed by mists and shadows. She was half aware that her nature had gained much and lost little by the experience. It all seemed very sad to her, and yet she felt that the sadness was rather an atmosphere of the past than of the present. It hovered somewhere behind her, it did not affect the future. Still there was a protest somewhere, gentle and weak,

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but quite troublesome, against this new, strong, imperious, wayward love, now rising in her bosom and anon sinking away almost into the depths out of which it had come. She trembled sometimes with a great fear, at other times she abandoned herself to it with a serene fullness of content.

Close to the river's bank, all overgrown with wild vines and darkly shadowed by clustering trees, there stood, distant about a mile from the DeKay place, an almost shapeless pile of brick and stucco, the ruins of a once stately Southern mansion. It had been burned, whether by accident or the work of an incendiary is not known. Some tragic legend was connected with its history—a vague story of hereditary feud, bloody encounter, the gloom of crime and the solemn hush that follows after violent death. It was not a story ever told by a DeKay, for it affected the history of the family a generation or two ago. The very oldest negroes on the plantation knew something of the dark outlines of the tragedy; but they had learned not to more than vaguely hint the extent of their knowledge by equivocal allusions and dubious generalities. The affair dated back to the early Alabama days, when slavery was in its most prosperous state in a financial way, and when chivalry, so-called, was at its zenith. The ruin, with its picturesque walls overgrown with vines, was a fitting monument of the decay of medieval customs in the South as well as of the downfall of

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a once proud and in many ways brave and generous family.

It was towards this pathetic pile that Reynolds pulled with vigorous oar-strokes, as he and Mrs. Ransom set out upon the river from the little landing at DeKay Place. Unconsciously and with the ease that comes of great nervous and muscular force, made ready by his recent years of healthful habits and out-door training, he put such impulse into the little craft as made it leap like a skipping fish, leaving a whirling wake behind it, gleaming and darkling in sun and shade. He had not yet spoken of love. Indeed his heart was so full of this new and sweetly stormy passion that he could not master it sufficiently to clothe it in words. He was ever at the point of speaking and ever faltering and holding back his voice. So he found a relief in great muscular exertion. It was love thrilling along his nerves and sinews that made his arms tireless. He felt as if each long, strong sweep of the oars were bearing Agnes and him away from all the rest of the world, away from the past and into a sweet, shadowy solitude like that which the imagination has, in all ages, seen swimming on the furthest horizon, and towards which all lovers have hopefully but vainly steered their dream-ladened barks.

A sense of unworthiness repressed and almost smothered, a strong conscience bound down and enveloped in the fire of passion, these would make them-

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selves felt in a dull, heavy, indefinite way. He could not shake off for long at a time a consciousness that all this deep, sweet, strong happiness flooding his soul to bursting, was ephemeral, and would vanish at the touch of the first sinister *faux pas* by which the past might be uncovered.

Mrs. Ransom, in the after part of the boat, sat facing Reynolds, her lissome figure in an attitude of almost childish carelessness and grace. She was, apparently, as unaware of her rare charm of person as was he of his immense physical power. It is one of the wholesomest of out-door influences that eliminates, for the time, the frivolous conventionalities of social life, and establishes in their stead something of the freedom of the wind and the transparent freshness of running water. Nature, by some occult process, reaches our hearts and sponges off the sediment of artificial sentiment, so that the simpler elements of life are set to work in us without any hindrance. Given a boat, a calm, clear river, fine weather, a man and a woman, youth, strength, health, and what an infinitude of happiness may be expected! It is often the case that human experience is, under such circumstances, condensed to the last degree of denseness, or expanded to an ethereal tenuity never dreamed of in the hot-house narrowness of city life. Out-door realities are so strong and dreams are so wide and fair where the sun shines and the air is full of balm and the water flows with such a liberal, far-going mur-

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mur. Tragedy has a broader and deeper significance enacted without any stage limitations, and comedy catches a sparkle from the brooks and the daylight and the starlight, never reflected from gas jets and painted backgrounds.

Very little was said between Mrs. Ransom and Reynolds in the time it took to reach a place where they could land near the ruin, their conversation confining itself to observations on such little incidents as happened during their quick flight. Once a flock of wood-ducks sprang in a rapid whirl from the water near them and winged their way up the stream, their bright colors shining with a peculiar twinkle, as far as the eye could follow them. Little shadowy sandpipers ran along the sandy margins, here and there, or flew across from bank to bank with their comical jerky motion. In some places the reeds grew down to the water's edge in dense brakes wherein the hermit thrush and the catbird could be seen by fitful glimpses. The rapid movement of the boat kept changing the point of view, and at each change some new arrangement of the trees, the cane, the tall dry stalks of water grass or of the bold banks of the river attracted the eye.

Reynolds felt the stimulus of his passion tingling in his blood. His bronzed cheeks wore a faint flush and his eyes were full of earnest, tender light. He stranded the prow of the boat on a little crescent of sand at the foot of the bluff and helped Mrs. Ransom out. She

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had directed him where to land, and now he turned to her and asked:

"Now, how shall we get up to the top of the bluff?"

"There is a sort of stairway yonder by that old tree," she answered, pointing with her hand. "It is badly dilapidated, but we can climb it easily."

Somewhere, not very far away, they heard the booming of General DeKay's and Mr. Noble's guns. The sport must have been fine, for the shooting was rapid.

They found the stair—a zig-zag flight of crazy steps, leading up to the plateau above. In order to reach its foot, they had to stoop and creep under the low-hanging boughs of a tree. Reynolds took hold of her arm to help her. On a sudden impulse she freed herself from him. A thrill had come with his touch, and something like fear took momentary possession of her. She fled nimbly up the steps ahead of him, as if she meant to escape him entirely. He scarcely noticed her start and her haste, for some vines and tangled branches hindered him and disturbed his vision. When she emerged into the sunlight of the level space on the bluff, Mrs. Ransom stopped, ashamed of her foolish flight, and turned about just in time to look straight into the eyes of Reynolds, as he was surmounting the topmost steps.

"I beat you climbing," she exclaimed, her voice shaking a little from the effect of her exertion.

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"I feared you had left me for good and all," he replied; "but how pale you are! Was your effort too violent? Are you ill?"

"Not at all," she responded, the negative phrase peculiar to the Southern people falling with a sort of breathless readiness from her lips. "Am I really pale?"

"Perhaps not," he said, seeing the rosy light coming into her cheeks again. "I only imagined it; but it is a difficult place to climb, and you came up like a bird. You shouldn't take such risks: it is dangerous."

He looked about for the ruin. A tall, heavy chimney-stack rising above a tangled mass of wild vines and trees answered his inquiry.

"Come this way," she said, leading on; "there is a path, further up the slope, that goes round to the entrance."

He followed her quick movements, and soon she stopped before an arched doorway in the old semi-circular transom of which a few pieces of stained glass still remained. On either hand stood fragments of stuccoed pillars all festooned with vines. She paused but for a moment, then went under the arch and passed from roofless room to roofless room with the swift, certain step of one quite familiar with the place. Every where the ivy and wild grape vines had draped the crumbling walls and heaps of rubbish, so that, in places, bowers as fanciful as those of fairy-land, made a sweet crepus-

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cular gloom, though the foliage was mostly gone. He tried to reach her side, but her quick turns and elusive movements kept her all the time just ahead of him, and her sweet voice came back to him, as if tossed to him over her shoulder, luring him on and on, in and out through the labyrinth of rooms. Once she stopped for the merest moment to look out, through a ragged opening which had once been a window, down upon the placid face of the river. He came close to her and bent low to gaze over her shoulder. She felt his breath on her neck.

"How lovely!" he murmured, in that deep, rich voice which always vibrated so strangely in her ears. His moment had come.

"Lovely," she echoed, and slipped away, like some shy, wild thing afeard of its own voice.

Reynolds was burning with a desire to speak to her of his love, and she, hardly knowing why, felt a sweet dread of him. She tripped along through what had been a broad hall and turned into an open space where some of the walls had crumbled into a great heap around the base of the stack of chimneys. Here it was that suddenly a man, wild-eyed, shaggy-headed, ragged and gaunt, sprang up before her in a menacing attitude with a heavy pistol in his hand. She gave one little chirruping scream, threw up her arms and sank in a crumpled heap to the ground. Reynolds sprang forward with a loud ejaculation. His movement had all

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the appearance of a furious attack upon the startled ruffian, who, in sheer self-defense, as he thought, raised the pistol and fired. Reynolds felt the blow and the dull pang of the bullet in his right shoulder. The man did not fire again, but turned and fled through the nearest opening. It was all so sudden, the whole thing happening within the space of half a minute, that no one of the actors had time to get more than a glimpse of the situation before the act was ended. The ruffian, as was afterward ascertained, was a condemned murderer who had escaped from jail just the night before he was to have been hanged. No doubt he was lying asleep when the approach of Mrs. Ransom startled him, and thinking it was an attempt to recapture him, he had fired and fled. The sound of the shot roused Mrs. Ransom from her half swoon and she leaped to her feet. Reynolds put forth his hand and touched her on the arm.

"Be calm—don't get scared, I can protect you," he said, but he could not see her. A cloud was in his eyes and a reeling sensation in his brain.

She looked up into his face and saw how deathly white it was.

"Are you hurt?" she quaveringly asked, taking a step nearer him.

He mumbled some unintelligible answer, felt blindly about in the air with his hands, staggered, gasped hoarsely, and fell at full length upon the ground, face-

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downward, arms outspread, and lay quite still. Suddenly, to Mrs. Ransom, the silence of the place became awful, dense, impenetrable. She screamed, but her voice seemed not to go a yard from her lips. She stood for a moment with clenched hands, her face pinched and thin, her eyes fixed upon the prostrate form of Reynolds; then she threw herself down beside him and tried with all her might to turn him so that she could see his features; but he was so heavy and she so weak that her effort was vain. She called for help until her voice became thick with hoarseness.

"Oh, is he dead?" she wailed, "is he dead? Oh, won't some one come! Must he die now! Oh, and I love him so—love him so!"

It was as if her grieving words called him back from lifelessness, for he moaned, sighed deeply, and by a violent struggle turned himself on his side with his face toward her. He opened his eyes and looked inquiringly at her for a time, then he closed them with a weak, tremulous motion of the lids. She clasped his head in her arms, and summoning all her strength, lifted it upon her lap. The blood was beginning to ooze through his saturated clothes and trickle on the ground beside him. It almost crazed her to see this, but she was as powerless as a child to help him. She could but bend over him, and, brushing the dark heavy hair back from his forehead, where cold beads of sweat had risen, kiss him again and again in the ecstasy of her

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excitement. He was not unconscious now, but he was limp and nerveless, his immense vitality slowly gathering itself for the effort to recover equilibrium. Faint almost unto death as he was, he felt the thrill her kisses sent throughout his frame, and he did not note the pain of his ugly wound.

"Oh, you must not die, you must not die!" she wailed, in a sobbing voice. "Open your eyes for my sake, John—for my sake, do you hear, for I love you so!"

He heard every word, but he could not open his eyes or move his lips, though slowly and surely his strength was coming back, despite the rapid loss of blood.

The pistol ball was a very large one and it had made a bad, almost fatal wound, having passed through his shoulder and a part of his chest, barely missing the lung. The shock had had a paralyzing effect, causing the insensibility from which he was rallying.

It was a striking picture they made grouped against the dark back-ground of the old wall, with the dim light falling over them. If a broken spear and a cloven helmet had rested hard by, it would have served well for a tableau of medieval days, a lady nursing the head of her fallen knight within the crumbling ruins of some battered castle.

"Why *did* we ever come here! Oh, love, my own love, open your eyes! Speak to me: say you will not die, you will not die!"

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Her words, so insistent, so despairing and so passionate, filled his consciousness with an all-satisfying sense of happiness. He could scarcely understand why she should not be willing to let him lie quietly and listen to her, for he had not recovered himself sufficiently to be able to grasp the reality of her suffering or of his own condition.

"Speak to me, speak to me," she kept reiterating, until at last, like one freeing himself reluctantly from a sweet dream, he moved his lips, making no sound at first, but presently saying:

"Where are you, Agnes?"

His voice was so strange and so low that she could not catch his words. She bowed her head so that her face almost touched his.

"What is it—what did you say?" she tenderly asked.

He put up his left hand and swept it over her cheek and down along her shoulder. Then, as his wound began to pain him, he groaned in a suppressed way.

"What ails me? What—ah, the shot—he hit me, I know—I remember now," he said, beginning to gather strength. "Let me sit up."

With a strong effort he raised himself to a sitting posture and smiled feebly.

"I have called and called, but no one will come. What shall we do?" she cried, wringing her hands and gazing helplessly at him. "Oh, why did we ever come here?"

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"Be calm, darling," he said, looking fondly at her, the wan smile on his face growing more intense. "I will show you that I am a man worthy of your love." Then he arose and stood up, tall and beautiful in his strength, before her, seeming to defy his wound and its pain, though his face was pale as death.

"Come," he added, "let us go to the boat and return to the house. Come, I am strong now, and I love you, Agnes, my own little woman—come with me."

He caught her with his unhurt arm and drew her hard against his side. With a swift, firm tread he went with her down to the landing, never faltering or wavering until he had fixed himself in the stern of the boat and directed her how to paddle out to the middle of the stream.

All this time he had been losing blood and his pain had been excruciating. He had made a grand effort, and now the reaction came with a power that he could not resist. He sank back with his head resting on his arm and lay there as white and lifeless as if dead. She thought him dead, and sat there numb and motionless, letting the boat drift with the gentle current. Every thing about her appeared shadowy, misty, unreal. Her heart scarcely beat. Why was it that, in the midst of this awful trial, there came to her mind a vivid memory of the short romance of her married life down on the old plantation by Mariana? Some of those days were dreamily happy ones with her wild boy husband—the

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days before discontent and trouble came. Why would the reckless blue eyes and curling, yellow hair waver before her, between the strong, pallid features of this man whom she now loved with such fervor?

Slowly the boat drifted on in the sunlight, between the reed-covered banks, bearing its strange load down toward the DeKay place. It was a dark touch with which to end so charming an idyl as the past few days had been; but life in the South favors the tragic and the melodramatic: it is the life of passion and of sudden changes.

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CHAPTER XIV.

A WHISPER IN THE CABIN.

ONE day, while Reynolds was gone to General Dekay's, White came home from Birmingham perfectly sober and with no gambling story to tell. Miliy met him at the gate, as usual, with the same pitiful look of patient inquiry in her eyes. He chucked her under the chin and in an uncommonly cheery voice said:

"He air comin' home right away soon, Milly, I hev hearn from 'im straight. Go an' drive up the steer fer me, won't ye? I want er haul er jag er pine-knots purty soon."

"I don't b'lieve he air a comin', no sich a thing. I dremp he wer' married, an' thet's a sign o' death. How d'ye know he air a comin'?" She spoke almost pettishly, looking fixedly at her father, whose pale eyes wandered aimlessly from object to object.

"I seed Mr. Noble, thet banker down ther': he hev come back. He said ter me, says he, 'The Colonel, he an' Mr. Moreting air comin' nex' week,' thet's what he says ter me."

Milly let her eyes fall and began digging in the ground with the toe of one of her shoes.

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"Thet young lady, thet Miss Noble down ther', hes she kem back?" she presently asked.

"La, yes, she hev," quickly replied White. "Bless yer life, yes, she kem with 'er pap. Oh, yes, she kem too, she did."

"What meks John stay so long?"

"Oh, him? w'y he's a havin' a stavin' ole time er shootin' quails an' a drinkin' er fine liquor an' er smokin' good seegairs. Don't yer go to blamin' him fer stayin' awhile down ther': hit air a good place ter be at, yer better think."

"Seems like he mought never come," she murmured, and there were tears in her eyes as she started to go and fetch the ox.

White went into the house and shut the door.

"I hev a bad secret to tell ye," he said to his wife, "an' I don't wan't yer ter let Milly know airy breath about it, nuther."

"Well, less yer what it air."

"Ye won't tell Milly?"

"Nairy word."

"Sarting an' sure?"

"Yes."

"Well, the Colonel he air shot."

"Shot?"

"He air."

"Shot?"

"He air, sarting."

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"Goodness! an' who tole ye?"

"Thet banker, down ther' at town, Mr. Noble, he tole me. Hit wer' a feller 'at broke jail 'at done hit, a outdacious murderer, down yer at some other town, 'at wer a goin' ter be hung, an' some friend of his'n helped 'im ter break jail an' give 'im a pistol, an' he put out through the country. Hit seems, f'om what thet banker down yer says, 'at the Colonel were a galivantin' off to some lonesome ole house wi' a widder 'oman, 'an thet feller he wer in ther an' jes' shot 'im down."

"Goodness alive! Hit didn't kill 'im? The Colonel he hain't dead?"

"No, not dead, but he air bad off. He air laid up in bed. He hev got a hole through 'im."

Mrs. White began filling her pipe with great energy, her husband following her example. There was a space of silence, then he said:

"We hev got ter lie ter Milly fer all thet's out. Hit'll never do fer her ter know it 'at the Colonel's hurt. She'd go 'stracted."

"She mought jest as well. Hit air no use er foolin', he's not goin' ter hev 'er."

"Hev her! Hev *her!* w'at upon the airth are ye talkin' 'bout?"

"She loves 'im."

"Milly? *She* love? *She* love *him?*"

"Ye-es, she-e lo-ove hi-im!" drawled Mrs. White in a high key, wagging her head with each word.

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White looked at her in utter consternation.

"Thet leetle silly gal love *him?* W'y she air no more'n a tom-tit er a hominy-bird ter be a lovin' the Colonel. Shorely she hain't gone an' been no sich a dang fool es thet!"

"She hev."

"How d'ye know?"

"Hain't I got no eyes, ner years?"

"Ye hev, sarting, an' a tongue."

"Now, smarty! Ye think ye've said somethin'!"

"Beg parding. But this yer stuff 'bout love, hit air a bad thing. I commence ter see into some er Milly's cur'us notions, ef thet air's the case. But dang ef I b'lieve sech a thing."

"Well, hit air the case, an' there's more ter come. Ye hain't hearn the wo'st part."

"An' what d'ye mean by thet?"

"I mean a heap, thet's w'at I mean."

"A heap er what?"

"Ef ye'll promerse me on yer wordy honor ter keep still tell I say at ye may go free, I'll tell yer w'at."

"I promerse, sarting."

"On yer wordy honor?"

"Yes."

"I'm erfeard ye'll go ter bein' a fool an' makin' a fuss 'fore I whant ye to. 'Cause ye see, hit mayn't be es bad es it mought."

As Mrs. White said this, White looked searchingly

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into her face, and what he saw there caused him to move uneasily and puff his tobacco smoke nervously.

"What is this yer what yer a hintin' at, anyhow?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

"I hain't erbleeged ter tell ye, an' I'll jest never do hit er tall, ef yer a goin' to be er fool an' high-rantin' aroun' like er eejet er somethin'."

"Didn't I promerse ye? Hain't thet enough? Ef hit tain't, what d'ye want me to do?"

"W'y I whant ye ter never say er word ter nobody 'bout w'at I tell ye, tell I say so, not a single word, nor do a thing 'bout hit of any kind. Do ye promerse?"

"Yes."

"On yer sacurd wordy honor?"

"Yes, dang it all, go on!"

"Now I'r a goin' ter tell ye somethin' at air orful, an' I don't know w'at to do erbout hit. But 'member, yer promersed me."

"Yes."

"Ye'll keep right still, an' never say a word, er do a single thing erbout hit?"

"Yes, I tole ye thet, long ago, 'bout a dozen times. Go on, an' say what yer a goin' to."

They were looking at each other, as people do who are about to experience some grave domestic crisis. Mrs. White's sallow face had suddenly taken on a hot flush, and her eyes looked worried and hollow.

"I d'know hardly how ter say hit with my mouth,"

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she falteringly began. "I wush I never hed a been born'd, no how!"

Tears came into her eyes and her lips quivered.

White leaned over close to her, taking the pipe from his mouth, and said in a low, hoarse voice:

"What air the matter, wife?"

"Oh, a heap, a heap air the matter!" she sobbed.

White put his hand on her shoulder and brought his ear close to her lips.

"Tell me now, I want er know," he gently and gravely urged.

She whispered something in a rapid, sobbing way. Not more than a dozen words, but White's face shriveled as if with a great heat. He drew back from her and glared like a wild beast. Not a sound came from his writhing lips. His thin jaws quivered.

"'Member yer sacurd wordy honor," said the woman. "Ye promersed me, ye know."

He got up and tramped aimlessly around the room. Presently he took down his long flint-lock rifle from its rack over the door, and blew into its muzzle.

"Ye'll not brek yer wordy honor?" she insisted.

He put the gun back and came and sat down by her again. Just then Milly opened the door and entered the room carrying her coarse sun-bonnet in her hand. The exercise of fetching the ox down from his browsing place on the mountain side had put a bright color in her cheeks, and the wind had been tossing her pale,

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straw-gold hair so that it hung in elfish tangles about her neck and shoulders. She scarcely glanced at her father and mother.

"I hitched 'im out ther'," she said, referring to the ox, and passing on into the kitchen, went by that round-about way into Reynolds' room. She was very sly, but they heard her moving about, and knew she was once more re-arranging his things.

They looked at each other with something of that hopeless, dazed expression often observed in the eyes of the lower animals when hurt to death. Milly had left the outer door open and the cool mountain air poured in, rustling vaguely such loose articles as its current could stir.

Little more was said between the man and his wife, for there seemed nothing to say. A cloud had settled over their compressed, barren lives. Nothing in their natures was ready or flexible. They stared at fate, as they stared at each other, with the hopelessness of utter bewilderment.

Days went by, days of that languid, cloudless weather which comes to those mountains in early February, and the little household of the cabin went through the dry, spiritless round of duties, as if some spell had fallen upon them. True there was no marked visible change in their way of life; that was impossible. The limitations of human action nowhere else are set with such rigid immutability as they are, and perhaps always will

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be, in those cramped, unfertile, almost barren mountain regions of the South. No advance, no retrogression (save where here and there a railroad brings its little whisky centers), all is stagnant, dull, dry, hopeless poverty. Illiteracy, sterility, and that stubborn conservatism which is born of them, rest like an atmosphere around those poor people. They move and breathe and are stolidly content.

When a month had passed and Reynolds had not come, Milly, who had been kept in ignorance of the true state of affairs, began to show stronger signs of disappointment. She was restless and anxious, wandering about the house or leaning upon the gate, silent, sad-eyed, expectant and hopeless by turns, a source of deep trouble to her parents.

Now and then White attempted to cheer her up, but the words seemed to come dead and meaningless from his dry lips when he would say:

"He air a havin' a outdacious good time down ther', he air, an' he don't like ter quit off yet. Jest ye wait a day er two an' 'en ye'll see 'm a comin' up yer, Milly, a comin' up yer——" his voice would most usually fail him, but he would go on: "Yes, he air comin' back purty soon, when he hev hed all the shootin' he ken git."

Such statements, reiterated so often, lost a large part of their reassuring power, but Milly liked to hear them, and they were the best that he could do.

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CHAPTER XV.

A DISCLOSURE.

THE day following that on which Reynolds received his wound brought letters to Moreton from his home in England, with intelligence of the sudden death of his father, and a request for him to come at once. This summons was so urgent and peremptory that nothing short of immediate departure could be thought of. So he went; but not without Cordelia's promise to become his wife, and not before he had reached a full understanding with Mr. Noble on the subject. It was hard for him to break away from the sweet meshes in which he was entangled, and hard for him to leave Reynolds lying there pale and emaciated, with little more than the breath of life in him; but he could not stay. He promised to come back within two months, little thinking at the time that he would never see Birmingham again, or at best for some years to come. But so it was. When he reached England he found that the best interests of his father's estate required the sale of the American property, and that he would have to give his entire attention to the home affairs.

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Soon after Moreton's departure Mr. Noble, following the fashion of thrifty Americans, seized upon a most favorable offer and changed his place of abode to New York City, where he became the chief of a strong banking establishment in which he had hitherto held a subordinate interest. So that by the time that Reynolds was beginning to gather strength and to forge well past the point of danger from his hurt, he was left alone with the DeKay household. No invalid ever had more careful nursing or had thrown around him more charming influences. General DeKay gave his entire time and attention to ministering to the needs of his guest, appearing to feel that, in some way, as a host, he had been careless and thus to blame for the almost fatal misfortune to one of his party. He had formed a great liking for Reynolds, beginning no doubt with the young man's excellent shooting in the first day's sport, and made stronger by the manly qualities and magnetic influence he possessed in a marked degree; and this liking shaped itself during Reynolds' illness into an attachment very rarely engendered between men.

Mrs. Ransom, after the first great shock of the adventure had spent its force, exhibited a quiet courage and fortitude in strong contrast to her girlish weakness up at the ruin. She was tireless in her efforts, hopeful, even when the doctors doubted, and cheerful when every one else appeared ready to despair. She seemed to

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rely, with perfect confidence, on Reynolds' power to overcome the effect of the hurt, and when his enormous vitality began to assert itself, she went about the house with a gentle smile on her lips and a serene light in her beautiful eyes that told how her heart rejoiced. To know that he was under the same roof with her and that he loved her and that he was getting well, filled her with a contentment little short of perfect happiness. She was not an intellectual woman, as the phrase goes; she knew little of the world's philosophies and sophistries, but she was a true woman, full of feminine sentiment, cleverness and earnestness: shy, wary, elusive, and yet outright and artless, at times, as any child. Her beauty was of that rarer Southern type which is the opposite, in most features, of the fiery, passionate, voluptuous, tropical model which has been unjustly copied into art and literature as the representative one.

Beauty that shrinks from self-advertisement and delights in blooming in a sheltered place where the light is never over-strong, secretes such essence and fragrance, takes on such modest and delicate color, and holds about it an atmosphere so subtly individual, that it is not within the power of brush or pen to portray it so easily and effectually as it may that other and coarser and possibly more vital sort. It is this beauty that a pink ribbon to-day or a bunch of violets to-morrow, or any other simple bit of adornment, seems so

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perfectly suited to as to appear a part of the wearer. If Agnes Ransom was rather below the best womanly stature, the casual observer would not have noticed it, for her bearing was high and her development strikingly balanced, or rather, so evenly balanced as not to be striking, and her movements had the smoothness and rhythm of a perfect lyric. She was a woman whose love would be of lasting value to a true man, and to love whom would generate nothing lawless or short-lived in the masculine nature. If Cleopatra stands as one type of eastern beauty and passion, Ruth stands as another. A woman like Agnes Ransom may be taken as representing very fairly a certain class of Southern women who carry about with them, even in old age, a girlishness and simplicity, combined with a shyness and exclusiveness often mistaken for either prudery or unfriendliness. Plantation life is, to an extent, a lonely one in a climate where it is possible and pleasing to spend much time out of doors, and where all the influences of out-door nature tend to generate repose. One can not but observe what seems to be the effect of these influences in determining the physical and mental contour of the Southern girl. She is slender, well developed, lithe, graceful, rather inclined to repose, not strikingly intellectual, has strong domestic inclinations and bears about with her an air of provincial innocency and naïveté that has a marked flavor of the isolation and the freedom of the plantation. Mrs. Ransom

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had been very little in city society; a winter in New Orleans and a few visits to Savannah limiting her experience beyond that obtained from a residence in the dreamy, isolated little old place of her birth, Pensacola. She was not a Catholic, but the rudiments of her education had been obtained in a convent, and something of that demure quietness and quaintness of manner characteristic of the nun had remained with her. No doubt her short and trying married experience had modified her charms of person and character to an interesting extent, adding an inexpressible value to her beauty. A trace of lingering sadness, slight but always present, gave a mild emphasis to the purity of her face and the low music of her voice. Such a woman could not fail to touch the heart of a fervid and passionate man like Reynolds, whose whole nature had been introverted for years, and whose life had been so long repressed and stagnant.

During the half delirium of his fever, while the inflammation of his wound was at its worst, he lay and watched her come and go, his heated vision making an angel of her about whose ethereally lovely form halos and rainbow colors played fantastic tricks. Sometimes the apparition was double, and then one of the angels took the form of poor little Milly White, whose haunting, hungry face flashed with a heavenly light. But as he grew stronger and the fever left him, it was Agnes Ransom, the pale, sweet, earnest little woman, that

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controlled his every thought. He was content to lie there and patiently wait on nature's slow work so long as she hovered near. He felt securely fixed in her love. Every word, that in the stress of agony, she had uttered up there in the ruin, lay like some divine germ in his heart, growing and strengthening with every moment. He did not seek to have her say more and he said little himself. When she fetched flowers from the out-door conservatory, grand cream-white and blush camellias, roses, jasmine and violets, and arranged them on the odd little mahogany table by his bedside, he would whisper some tender phrase of thanks and love, and then she would sit by the window and read aloud to him some forgotten romance, such as is to be found in every ancient Southern library. Happy invalid! to have such balm for his wound! And so the days of his convalescence drew by, not in pain and fretfulness and impatience, but freighted with the richest gifts of love. He was like one in some favored nook of fairy land, realizing the tenderest visions of dreams.

One day, near the first of March, when he had grown able to sit propped up on a sofa by a window, whence he could look out over the broad landscape to where the sky came down to the tufted woods, or turn his eyes upon short silvery bits of the river, he said to her:

"I shall soon be able to go away. I feel my strength coming back with every breath."

She looked up from the needlework that she chanced

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just then to have in hand, and, with one of her slow, sweet smiles, shook her head.

"You must not begin to hurry. You must be patient, ever so patient. A moment of haste might cause a month of trouble. You can not afford to run any risks."

"Oh, I am patient," he replied. "I really find myself dreading to get well, selfish wretch that I am. Do you observe that I never take into consideration the immense trouble I am causing all of you? I think of nothing but the charmed life I am living—the sweet comforts I am receiving."

"I really believe you are getting well," she said. "When you talk in that strain I know you are but trying to hide a longing for your mountain air and the freedom of your hermitage."

"You do me wrong," he responded, with an earnest resonance in his voice. "I am so content to be as I am that when I go to sleep I do not even dream of being well."

"I am glad of it, for the doctor says that a quiet mind is the best salve for a healing wound."

"You had better not convince me that the doctor is right, for I might be tempted to get restless in order to prolong my period of delicious convalescence. Beware, if you don't want me lolling in easy chairs or propped on cushions and pillows for you to minister to all the season."

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"Oh I shall know it if you begin to take on the air of a professional invalid, and shall discharge you at once," she exclaimed, with a light laugh. "You won't be interesting as a—a sham! I hate shams and deceits and hidden things of every sort."

He looked at her with such a sudden, though barely noticeable change of expression in his eyes, that her quick intuition told her of some serious thought that had leaped, unbidden and unwelcome, into his mind.

"Hidden things," he said, with a peculiar smile. "Hidden things are often much better hidden than disclosed, and it is a mercy to the world that secretiveness is one of the strongest elements of human nature."

"Perhaps so," she said, growing grave and thoughtful. "But it would be so much better if there were never any need to exercise one's secretive faculties."

"Oh, a dormant faculty would be contrary to the economy of nature. Even confession catches a precious fragrance from the transgression long hidden away. Conscience would not even be ornamental, much less useful, if it bore no treasure of sins known to it only." He spoke in an airy, idle manner, but there went with his tones a ring of something not quite pleasing.

"You shock me," she exclaimed, in perfect earnestness, a cloud gathering in her eyes. "I hope you do not believe in such ugly and dangerous doctrines."

Immediately he gathered in his straying thoughts

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and crushed down the memory that was nagging at his consciousness. He felt with sudden clearness how easily he might turn away from him the confiding earnestness of this sensitive woman, and attract from her instead the interest born of a doubtful sort of fascination.

"I don't believe in them," he smilingly answered. "I was merely giving rein to an idle whim of the moment. On the contrary, I believe in perfect frankness in all things. Confession and forgiveness are together the safety-valve of society, as they are chief among the Christian virtues."

"Yes," she said, with a sort of relief in her tone. "There is as much to ask as to grant in that law. I could not quite respect myself if I should deceive any one, and I should feel it a triumph of duty over the strongest bias of my nature if I should thoroughly forgive one who had willfully deceived me."

"But you would forgive such an one," he hastily exclaimed, looking almost eagerly into her eyes.

"I should feel it incumbent upon me to try with all my might," she responded.

"One who would deceive *you* in a matter of any moment," he observed, with a warmth and vehemence that fairly startled her, "would deserve never to know forgiveness. He would be a monster outside the limitations of the Christian code."

"You shouldn't say that," she replied, a pink spot appearing on either cheek. "It would be a great deal

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worse to deceive some one more ignorant and much weaker than I. I have had many opportunities, denied to a large number of young women. I ought to know better how to evade the evils of falsehood and deceit."

Reynolds did not speak for some minutes. A swell of the fragrant south wind came through the window, and the first mocking bird of the season was singing in a magnolia tree at the further angle of the house. The drowsy charm of spring's earliest stirrings hovered in the sky, the air, the far-spreading fields and the shimmering glimpses of water. Something like the warning of a distant, scarcely audible voice was ringing in his ears. Below his dreamy happiness he could feel the beginnings of a vague uneasiness.

"I know, I know," he presently said, and he did not realize the almost brutal directness of his words, "yours was a bitter and burning disappointment. You deserved every thing that you hoped for, nothing that you received."

Her face grew pale and flushed at once, so that the spot on either cheek shone like carmine on a milk-white ground. She looked helplessly at him with her lips slightly parted and her eyes beaming, as if through a haze.

"Oh, I have pained you!" he exclaimed, with such a penitent and sorrowful intonation that she made a weak effort to smile. "Forgive me," he went on rap-

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idly. "I seem in an unfortunate groove to-day. You know I would not wound you for the world."

"It relieves me that you have said what you have," she replied, after a pause, "for it tells me that you know my past. I wanted you to know, and I could not tell you. I did not see how I ever could begin or how——"

"Let it pass, let it go by like the wind," he murmured; "the future is all ours, we will make it as pure and lovely as the sky yonder, won't we, love?"

She crossed her hands in her lap and smiled on him with tears in her eyes. How grand and beautiful he appeared to her, reclining there, with his stalwart limbs outstretched and his manly face beaming with love. It was a quick, uncontrollable impulse that caused her to say, with a tender tremor in her voice:

"I wanted you to know that I loved him and that if he were alive now I would still love him, notwithstanding all that has happened."

"Yes, yes, that is all right, all right," he quickly responded. "It is sweet of you to feel so; but he is—he is not alive, you know, and—"

"Sometimes I have dreamed that it is not true—that he is not dead, but may be living yet. I never could get the particulars, the country was in such turmoil and he was so far away. Somehow the thought has haunted me that some day he will come back."

A strange grim look settled on Reynolds' face.

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"He will never come back," he said.

"No," she replied, "I know he will not. It is foolish for me to allow the thought to enter my mind, but it will, and I can not drive it out."

"You must, Agnes, you must," he exclaimed with a rush of passion, "for my sake, love, for my sake."

She sat for a moment in silence, and then, as the tears welled up afresh in her tender eyes, she replied:

"You know how gladly I would, but I can not. It grows upon me since—since I have known you, and it will not be banished. Sometimes I find myself actually going to the door to look—"

"Hush! Oh, Agnes, I can not bear it," he cried, his face growing pale with extreme excitement. "My God! I shall have to tell you all."

"Tell me all?" she plaintively, inquiringly murmured, looking wonderingly at him, for something in his voice, his face, his manner had given to his words a mysterious power.

"Yes, I will tell you, though it drive me from you forever. I see that I must, that it is my duty." He paused and hesitated. "I know," he went on, "that I am rushing into the dark, but I trust you, Agnes, and I know you will do right—you will do no hasty thing. Remember, oh, remember how I love you."

"I can not understand—what is it you mean?—what—"

"No, you can not understand, but you will; it

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requires but a sentence." Again he faltered, and with his eyes fixed upon hers in a way that almost terrified her, seemed to be rapidly choosing his words before continuing.

"I am the man who fought with your husband, and—"

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed, holding her hands out toward him, her face ghastly.

"Yes," he resumed, "yes, it is so. He was to blame. He forced it upon me. I could not escape him. He would have killed me."

She let her hand fall in her lap and sat in a helpless, horrified attitude.

"You will hate me now, Agnes, but I have disclosed my secret and my dreadful duty is done. For the sake of my great love, say no bitter word."

She did not speak. How could she? Such a disclosure coming so suddenly and unexpectedly and from his lips, crushed her into that silence which is next to the silence of death.

He trembled now and his voice broke as he said:

"Do you see how hard it is? I refused to fight with him, because I did not believe in the practice of dueling, and then he forced an encounter in the street of San Antonio. I did every thing to avoid him, but I could not. I had to—to do what I did. Can you comprehend, Agnes?"

Still she remained speechless, motionless, bowed down and awfully pale.

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"I don't want to make any unmanly excuses—I would spare him for your sake; but he was all in the wrong, and it would be——"

She stopped him with a quick gesture.

"I can not hear this now—I am too weak and excited. I must go. Excuse me. I *must* go." She arose almost with a spring and passed swiftly out of the room.

A feeling of desolation swept, like a breath of noisome air, through the breast of Reynolds. It was as if the whole world had become a desert and his life a dreary, void waste. And yet there was a sense of relief, as if a great load had been cast aside. A load indeed, but not all the load he carried. He tried in vain to feel that his whole duty was done. He hid his face in his hands, but he could not shut out the truth. His whole past life lay like a fiercely illuminated panorama under his inward gaze. Ah, by what a zig-zag path, through what torments, had been his course! And how he had always panted for happiness! Must it end here? He raised his head and smiled in a way that would have been terrible to see. He clenched his hands, his eyes flamed. All the melodramatic fierceness and fervor of the old South had come upon him. He was ready with desperate courage to fight all the world.

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CHAPTER XVI.

CONVALESCENT.

MRS. RANSOM kept her room for several days. The shock she had received from Reynolds' confession carried with it something more than the predicament might at first view imply. She had loved her husband with all that romantic fervor characteristic of girlhood in a warm climate. He was a handsome youth, bright, impulsive, brave, passionate, reckless, holding her to him by that strange fascination, which we all know but can not account for, exerted by the bad over the good. When he had appeared to desert her she was not surprised, and the news of his death by murder saddened without shocking her beyond endurance. With the lapse of time the effect of her trouble had softened and faded; but she had never ceased to remember with a warmth of devotion, more of the imagination than of the heart, perhaps, the lover and the husband of her romantic girlhood. To be sure it had grown to seem no more than a tender dream, that period of love and happiness ending in gloom, but its memory haunted her.

Reynolds had in some way thrilled her life with

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something more potent than that girlish adoration with which she had honored her boyish husband. His influence over her was so strange and so new to her experience, so sweet and yet so masterful, so overwhelming. His love had shown her how little she had ever known of love before, love in its highest and perfectest development.

But this dreadful discovery—this dark, strange confession, fell upon her just at the time when it could have the effect of darkening as with the shadow of both crime and death the whole of her life. It seemed a stroke of fate so malignant, so merciless, so far-reaching, so unutterably terrible.

Reynolds suffered, but not as she did. He was gloomy, impatient, restless, but his wound continued to heal rapidly and his bodily strength hourly increased. His physical constitution was so elastic and vigorous that nothing, it seemed, could long disturb its equilibrium. Mentally, however, he was a man of extremes, surging to the furthest stretch of the tether in whatever direction impelled. Now he was in the deepest pit of despondency. The whole light of life had gone out.

As if to render his state more dreary by contrast, the weather waxed with sudden fervor into all the golden splendor of a semi-tropical spring. A sprinkling of pale green tassels and tender leaflets appeared on certain deciduous trees, and the grasses peculiar to

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the region began to shoot up bright spikes in the warmer spots of the brown fallow fields. A dainty woody odor pervaded the air and the mocking birds and brown thrushes sang gayly in the old trees about the mansion. The sky assumed a hue of such rich, tender azure as is observed nowhere save in the low country in especially favorable weather. And the river (what stream is more beautiful than the Alabama?) seemed to go by with some rhythmic impulse but half repressed in its broad, almost silent current.

Left much alone during these days, Reynolds naturally enough indulged in retrospection; but his thoughts rarely went further back than to that tragedy in the far West which had let fall upon his life the almost insufferable shadow—a shadow rendered doubly dense by its effect upon his present prospects. Often his gloomy reflections stopped at the mountain cabin and lingered with its inmates. The face and form of Milly White, once so meaningless to him, were rapidly assuming a significance that would not be ignored. Even his deep passion for Agnes Ransom and the brooding dread of its hopelessness now, could not shut away the accusing, vaguely insistent eyes of the little mountain girl. The isolation of that lonely plantation house gave him no sense of separation from the sources of his trouble.

One day, it was quite early in the morning, Uncle Mono, the old negro musician, came along in the plat below the window of the room in which Reynolds sat,

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and chancing to glance up, doffed his dilapidated hat and said:

"Mo'nin', boss, how's ye comin' on dis mo'nin', sah?"

"Oh, very well, Uncle Mono, thank you," responded Reynolds, smiling mechanically down on the black, wrinkled face so queerly ornamented with its shocks of almost snow-white wool. "How is Uncle Mono?"

"Po'ly, boss, po'ly. Got some 'flictions in de spine ob de back, an' los' my ap'tite some. Ole dahkey no 'count no mo' no how. Done see all my bes' days long 'go, boss."

Mono had a long-handled hoe on his shoulder. He was a sturdy, well-fed looking old fellow, with any thing but unhappiness in his shrewd, deep-set eyes.

"What are you up to this morning, Mono?" Reynolds idly inquired, leaning at ease on the window-sill.

"Gwine ter plant some watermillions, boss; got some pow'ful good seed yah, got 'em outer a watermillion what wus a million fo' sho'. I allus hab a fine patch, boss, kase I neber plants no po' seed. Yo 'member de book say: 'Yo' reaps what yo' sow, an' ef yo' sows de win' yo' reaps de whirlwin' sho'.'"

"That is a true saying, Mono," said Reynolds. "It holds good in the matter of all kinds of crops."

"Now yo's a gittin' ter de marrer ob de subjec', boss. 'Tain't many young men see it dat way, do'. Dey mos'ly sow a little ob de win' jes' fo' ter see how it

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wo'k; but de way dey cotches hell fo' it at de end ob de row am cunnin' ter see. I knows all 'bout it, boss; I's ben dah, *I* has. 'Spec' you's ben poo'ty rapid, too, boss, yo' got de gallopin' cut o' de eye. I knows a rus'ler w'en I see 'im. Yo' no slow-goin' creeter, boss, yah! yah! yah! yah–h–h!" The old wretch chuckled and guffawed, as if his sayings had stirred his feelings boisterously. The active wrinkles in his face made it ludicrously expressive. Reynolds made no response.

"I kin tell w'en I see a young feller, whedder he like de spo't er sowin' a leetle win' an' kinder hanker fo' de 'citement ob de whirlwin'. Yo' no spring chicken, boss, yo's ——"

"Be off, you old vagabond!" stormed General DeKay's military voice from somewhere among the shrubbery.

"Vag'bon', vag'bon', I's no vag'bon, no mo' 'n some white folks I knows ob," Uncle Mono muttered, very careful that the general should not hear him, and then shuffled away to plant his melon seeds.

The sort of flattery intended to be conveyed by the old negro's expressions fell with a peculiarly disagreeable effect upon the mind of Reynolds. It seemed quite devoid of the humor which Mono by his nods and winks and grimaces had meant to enforce. It had come like a direct, malignant, personal accusation, all the more disagreeable on account of its source. He gazed out across the little plat and through the tree-

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tops beyond toward the patches of blue sky, without noting any of the softness and beauty of the view. It chafed him immeasurably that he could see no escape from his tormenting situation. What was the use of struggling against the pressure? He felt all the verve and force of life slipping out. He was not weaker than most men whose passions are deep and turbulent and whose imagination is fervid and flexible. He passed easily from one extreme to another. He could not dally on the middle ground. Looking back now, he saw no good in all his past life, and looking forward he felt no expectation of good in the future. With his arm resting along the window-sill and his head drooping across it, he did not hear the light foot-fall on the floor. A hand was passed over his hair. When he turned Mrs. Ransom stood near him, with her sweet blue eyes bent with a measureless meaning of love upon him. He almost shrank from her at first, then he would have clasped her, but she eluded him and sat down in a chair beyond his reach.

"You are appearing so much better," she said, with a little constraint in her voice, but not disclosing any excitement. Her beautiful face was a trifle pale and there were faint, dusky lines under her eyes.

"Yes, I am nearly well, I hope," he replied, abetting her in the effort to make the occasion have a commonplace appearance.

"It is such sweet weather. Do you hear my mock-

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ing birds?" she inquired, trying to smile. "They have been having a stormy concert."

"Yes, they have had a real war of song all the morning," he answered.

A long space of silence ensued, during which they heard Uncle Mono chanting an African ditty to a lagging, melancholy tune, while he worked in his patch some distance away. Presently Reynolds almost abruptly said:

"You have been ill, your aunt says. I am so glad you are with me again. I have been lonely and—and sad. I was afraid you were worse than your aunt would acknowledge."

"It is all over now," she replied with a short, repressed sigh. "Do you feel strong enough to walk out? The morning is very inviting."

"It is a happy thought," he almost cheerily responded, rising and taking up his hat; "let us go out at once. I am tired of being indoors, despite the good nursing I have had."

They passed into the broad hall, where she took from a table her hat, on which the twisted sprig of mistletoe still remained, just as he had fixed it on the day of the shoot, and thence they went forth among the magnolia trees on the front lawn.

"One can never quite lose sight of the river here," said Reynolds; "see how it shines under the boughs yonder. Isn't it fine?"

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"Have you noticed that the gentle roar it had some weeks ago is almost silenced?" she asked.

"I had not, but I do now," he answered; "what is the cause?"

"It has fallen so low that its current is too sluggish, I suppose; but Uncle Mono and the rest of the negroes have a pretty saying that the river sings till the mocking birds begin, and then it becomes silent in order to listen to their voices."

"That is a poetical idea."

"They have a more grotesque one about the moon crossing the river."

"What is that?"

"They claim that if one takes a skiff and goes to the middle of the river, exactly at midnight when the moon is full, one may see the moon in the water making all sorts of wry faces at the moon in the sky."

"I have observed that myself," said Reynolds, very gravely.

"The moon making faces?" she exclaimed with a little smile, looking inquiringly up into his face.

"Yes, the skiff or the wind breaks the surface of the water into ripples which cause the reflection of the moon to appear to do all manner of fantastic things."

"Oh, I understand it now. I had never thought of that."

"But," she added, after a moment of silence, "it would be cruel to explain away Uncle Mono's fanciful

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legend or myth of the Alabama and the moon. Don't you think so?"

"The old scamp is not so ignorant," said Reynolds. "It would not be so easy as you might imagine to destroy his stories. He would have plenty of expedients for evading the demonstrations of natural philosophy."

"I should hope he would," she said, "for there is something fascinating in all his grotesqueries. They seem to have a smack of genuine African wildness of poetry in them."

They sat down on a low wooden bench, mossy with age and exposure to the weather, under a grand magnolia tree. Here they were in the full tide of the breeze with all the freshness and fragrance of the morning around them. The dingy old house, so large and plain and yet so picturesquely Southern, was just sufficiently removed to be nearly lost in its vines and trees. Reynolds felt some sort of dread lest their conversation should fall away from the lightness with which it had begun—a dread almost betrayed when he said:

"Can't you think of another negro conceit? I am sorry I spoiled the one about the moon."

"They have a story of the owl and the magnolia bloom," she answered, after a pause. "They say that the big laughing owl comes, in his wisdom, every spring, when the buds of the magnolias are just on the

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point of opening, and says to the tree: 'Hold fast, hold fast; if you speak now you'll lose your influence for a whole year,' but the tree does not heed the wise counsel. It opens its lips (the petals of its flowers) and spills its perfume. Then the owl laughs dismally and the tree has no more perfume for a year."

"That doesn't sound much like a thought of savage origin. It has a weak touch of civilization in it somewhere."

"Oh, the negroes have gathered liberally from us, no doubt," she said, reflectively stirring some dry leaves with the toe of her tiny boot.

It vexed him that this action reminded him of Milly White. He rubbed his forehead to try to dissipate the thought. Perhaps there was, scarcely known to himself, a deeper reason for his irritation in the consciousness that they both were beating against the wind to reach some common ground from which they might banish forever any allusion to what they felt must always remain a dreary memory. After a long silence, Mrs. Ransom, with the outright courage of her womanly sense of what was for the best, did not hesitate to approach the point.

"This thing, that you told me of the other day, must be our secret. The world has no right to it. I have considered it from every point of view possible to me, and I can see no other safe or proper course. Am I right?"

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Reynolds was startled by the steadiness and firmness of her voice and manner, but he clutched eagerly at the comfort of her suggestion, so like an echo of his own thought.

"I am glad to hear you say that," he replied. "I was on the point of saying it myself. Let us bury the subject forever. It is one of the inscrutable turns of fate over which we never had control. It is in the past. Let it stay there."

"I thought at first that I could not bear it, but it came to me, after the first shock, that you are the one most burdened and that I ought to help you," she responded, with an infinite tenderness in her voice. "I know you were not to blame."

"God knows how true that is, and how I love you," said he, in a husky accent, his cheeks pale with intense feeling, his eyes burning strangely.

Her face was turned somewhat from him, and as he looked at its fine profile and gentle grace of expression, he upbraided fate with unutterable rebuke because he had not been allowed to see and know her before any ill had befallen her. How little he understood the value that trouble and sorrow had added to her charms. He thought of nothing but the pathetic aspect of her experiences and the effect of her past and his upon the present and the future. He chafed under the conviction that this secret which they now held between them would never fall back among those cast aside things

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that form the rubbish of the past, but would stay close to them ready to come into view at any unguarded moment. In fact, would they not have to keep always this common burden well in view in order not to allow the cover to fall from it?

"Does your shoulder pain you?" she asked; but she knew that it was an older and more dangerous hurt that caused the pallor in his cheeks.

"No, it is coming along finely," he answered, with an effort at cheerfulness. "I shall be going away in a few days."

"Not so very few; you are not strong yet."

"Oh, yes, I am beginning to feel quite like myself, and my wound is almost healed."

"I shall miss you when you are gone," she said, with a little smile. "You have been my patient so long."

"Do you imagine that I can stay away? Don't you know that I will be back surprisingly soon? How can I live where you are not, Agnes?"

Just a hint of color suffused her cheeks. She dropped her eyes in a charming way, with that girlish air disclosing itself in her outlines, and yet some indefinable expression of great trouble remained.

"You will find the mountains delightful at this time of the year," she said. "The spring is very forward. The wild-flowers will be out and the mountain-slopes will be growing green."

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"But there is nothing left for me up there. Moreton is gone, the Nobles are gone: it will be very lonely."

"Then why go at all? Stay with us as long as you can," she said, with all the old naïveté in her voice. "The bass-fishing is beginning, uncle says, and you and he can enjoy it together. The spring fishing is very fine here."

"That will insure my return," he said, with the first laugh. "But I shall have to go up to Birmingham and look after some affairs. They are running a coal-switch into some of my lands, and I must see to leasing some of the best veins."

"Such lands must be quite valuable. Have you a large amount?" she asked, but she could not have told why.

"I have a great many acres, but the extent of the coal deposits remains to be ascertained. I have been offered a large sum for the estate, however."

"I can't visit Birmingham any more, now that Cordelia is gone. I wish she could have staid. She is a charming friend," she said, with that inconsequence which is so apparent in written conversation, but which runs unnoticed through the oral intercourse of even the best talkers.

"A few days—a week, at furthest—will set all my things to rights," he continued. "And then, if I may, I will come back to—to try the bass with General DeKay."

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It is by such bridges of straw that many a gulf is spanned; but who can successfully laugh at the structure, no matter how fragile, if it is able to serve the purpose for which it is built? Happy is he who can at will bind together or hold apart the incidents of life with the almost imperceptible gossamer threads of tact.

At the end of an hour they had managed to forget themselves somewhat, and it was with a feeling closely akin to annoyance that Mrs. Ransom read on a card brought to her by a servant—"MALLORY BERESFORD."

"Mr. Beresford has come," she said, a decided flush coming into her cheeks, "and wishes to see me. I shall have to go, I suppose. Will you return to the house now?"

"No, I will get some more air. You will come back, won't you, when he is gone?"

"Yes; that is, if he doesn't stay too long," answered she with a bright smile.

Reynolds let his eyes follow her lithe and supple form as she walked briskly toward the house. She was carrying her hat in her hand and there was a bit of bright ribbon fluttering back over one shoulder and down her back, under her dark coil of hair. Touches of the Southern, the warm, the dusky, the dreamy, filled in the spaces of the picture beyond and around and over her. The light brush of her feet, in the crisp, fallen leaves and tufts of grass, came back to him, and

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along with it a thrill sweeter and more mournful than any chord of the Æolian harp. He shook himself, drew his hand across his face, arose and strolled idly about under the trees.

"It is worth a great effort," he was thinking, "and I shall succeed. Life gives up its measure of happiness at last to the brave and earnest. The past shall not mold my future and hers. I will take her and go abroad. She shall forget, among the beauties and interesting changes of travel, all this foolish panorama that our imaginations have made out of the coincidents and calamities for which neither of us is to blame. Oh, we shall be happy yet!" He held his head high and his eyes flashed with mingled hope and defiance.

When he thought of Milly White he added: "I shall not forget to repay her for all her faithfulness and childish affection."

Faithfulness and childish affection! Faithfulness and childish affection! the echo went ringing away into the remotest nooks of his consciousness. For a time he struggled hard and finally he hurled memory aside to give himself wholly up to forming plans for the future. But no one is vigilant enough to keep unwelcome guests long out of the chamber of his brain. They flit in so swiftly at any chance opening. How giant strong and yet how furtive and silent they are!

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CHAPTER XVII.

DREAMS AND PLANS.

REYNOLDS lingered in the pleasant shadows of the magnolia trees, now slowly walking to and fro, now resting on some one of the old lichen-grown seats, his thoughts oscillating between the past and the future. He was aware, but not vividly, of how aimless and cowardly his life until now had been, and he was not quite sure that, no matter how strong might be his present purpose, the cowardice did not still linger with him. One thing he did realize perfectly: that he had not told the whole truth to Agnes Ransom. He might have avoided killing her husband had he been prompted by the highest moral motives. If before the act he had been as willing to fly from San Antonio and go bury himself in the lonely depths of Sand Mountain as he was after the blood was on his hands, he could to-day look up into the bright sweet sky and feel no load on his heart. But then, Heaven forgive the thought, Agnes could not have been his! It was with a dull, almost stolid sense of the gloom and hopelessness of his situation that he at the same

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time pondered the possibilities of the future. Throughout his consciousness, too, independent of the past or the future, the present fact of Agnes Ransom's love for him diffused itself with constantly increasing power, warmer, more vitalizing, more glorifying than sunshine and spring-tide and virile health combined. He knew and he did not know that he was trying to deceive himself and the woman he loved. He was aware and he was not aware that all his reasoning regarding the future was sophistry and that the things of the past were not dead. He smiled there under the dusky trees as if he were a guileless youth in the sweet wonder of his first love. He held his head high. Had he not flung all weights of memory behind him and set his eyes on a fair and calm future? Yes, he was going to be happy. He was already happy. He would take Agnes far away, beyond the sea, where no hint of the past could ever come. At length he caught a distant glimpse of Beresford going away, and then a little thrill of pity stole into his bosom. The man looked lonely, even at that distance, and moved as if bearing a burden of trouble, or so at least Reynolds' imagination colored the apparition.

Mrs. Ransom did not come forth immediately. She had borne the interview with firmness, and had tried to soften with such art as she could command the wound she was forced to inflict. Beresford was a gentleman as well as a man, and whilst he had urged

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his plea with all the passion of a strong nature, he had taken his final dismissal with the dignity of a courageous, if not lofty soul.

When he was gone, the reaction upon Mrs. Ransom's sensitive and already sorely taxed nerves was more than she had expected, and she went to her room and cried. It seemed so bitter a thing to do to one so earnest and honorable and gentle.

Reynolds saw the traces of tears on her face, when at last she did come out to look for him, but he avoided saying anything to call up an explanation. She told him the story, however, in her straightforward, simple way, acknowledging her regret and her tears, and ending with some outright praise of Beresford's worthiness.

"I am sorry he came," said Reynolds. "I felt for him when I saw him going away; but what else could you do?"

"Did he look sad?" she inquired with perfect naïveté, a sweet sorrowfulness in her voice.

"Oh, I couldn't tell, he was too far off," answered Reynolds. "It will all come right. We will not allow our imaginations to follow him. I must tell you my plans. I hope they will be your plans too."

She lifted her eyes to his but did not speak.

"First of all, Agnes," he went on, "will you be my wife?" The words fell dryly, strangely on her ear.

They were standing close to a tree and she was

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lightly leaning against the bole. She felt a quick but vague sense of fear, or something akin to it, strike coldly into her heart.

It was inexplicable, an almost irresistible impulse toward flight took hold of her. She could not speak. Something forbade it.

"Answer me, Agnes: you will marry me, won't you, love?" His voice was low and appealing.

Her trepidation and weakness were but momentary. She mastered herself by a strong effort, and, with a brave, earnest smile, put both her hands in his.

"Yes, I will marry you," she said.

He lifted the hands swiftly and kissed them, then he led her to one of the seats.

"I have been planning such a delightful life for us," he began, and with passionate eloquence went on to disclose his idea of their going abroad, for a time at least, to live in Italy or Switzerland or France, together, for each other, the blissful life of love.

Her imagination responded readily to his eloquent descriptions, and her face was soon aglow with enthusiastic interest. She had always dreamed of foreign travel, and the subject was one into which she could cast herself with all the abandon of a child. He saw with delight how his proposition pleased her, and he talked with a freedom and earnestness that were irresistible. They were now very happy lovers indeed, and the time sped on golden wings until a servant

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came to call them to luncheon. They had slipped away from the troubles that had haunted them into the true realm of the young—the rosy region of dreams.

The mid-day meal at the DeKay place was not, as is, perhaps, the prevailing custom on plantations, the principal one. Dinner came on early in the evening and was all the more enjoyable on account of the delightful temperature of the hour throughout most of the year.

Late in the afternoon a young gentleman from an adjoining plantation came down the river in a little boat to make a friendly visit. He had been one of the guests on the day of the shoot, a dapper, talkative youth whose fund of good spirits made him welcome at all times. He liked wine and tobacco, was somewhat of a horseman and never tired of discussing questions of angling and field sports. Of course General DeKay, who cared for nothing so much as such companionship, would not let him return until after dinner. His name was Lapham. The Laphams were a fine old family—nearly all the Alabama families below the mountains are reported to be fine and old—and he retained in his speech and manner much that was ultra old and Southern, along with certain strong traces of quite modern "slang and snap," as it is called.

He sat next to Mrs. Ransom at table, entertaining her and the rest with an account of some recent races

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at New Orleans, or Tuscaloosa, or somewhere, that he had been to see. There had been a row among some sports ending in one being killed.

"It was a mean murder," he remarked, "the man was given no show. I hope the law will be swift, as in the case of your man, Colonel Reynolds."

Reynolds looked at him with quick inquiry and Mrs. Ransom's face showed the shrinking of her feelings.

"Oh, they got him below Selma and hanged him," added Lapham in answer to the question in Reynolds' eyes. "They made short work of it: caught him and strung him up to the first tree."

"I haven't read the papers for several days," said General DeKay. "They lynched him, did they? Hanging is the popular thing now."

"Yes," answered Lapham. "He deserved it, I believe. It was a bad case. Killed a young fellow who had just been married. Loved the girl himself, it is said, and did the deed out of sheer revenge, because she took the young man in preference to himself. The circumstances were atrocious. The young wife is reported to have lost her reason on account of the affair."

There came a depressing silence over the little group at the table. Mrs. DeKay made haste to change the topic of conversation to one she was sure would interest the gentlemen.

"Have you tried the trout since this fine weather has

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come?" she asked, addressing Lapham. "I should think the angling might be good now."

The mention of trout (bass are called trout in the South) set the young man in the midst of one of his favorite elements. He began at once to tell how he had killed a four-pounder that very morning. He always killed four-pounders. "It was the gamiest fish I ever hooked, I think,—a regular savage. I toiled with it a full half hour before I could land it. At one time it had out nearly a hundred yards of line and I thought I never should get it checked up. If it had gone a little further my rod or my line—one would have suffered. It was jolly sport."

"I must rig up my tackle and try the river to-morrow," said the General. "Are you strong enough to join me, Colonel Reynolds? Of course you will come down, Mr. Lapham?"

"I am sorry," answered Reynolds, "but I fear my shoulder is too tender. I am quite anxious to get well, and to that end must heed my doctor's advice."

"I will join you, General," said Lapham with eager readiness. "This morning's taste has made me ravenous for another round with the finny beauties."

"What flies are best here?" inquired Reynolds, thinking of something else.

"Oh, we use minnows," said Lapham, "though I have had success with a bob of deer-tail hairs and red feathers. The trout won't rise to a regular fly."

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"Up in the mountains I find the 'Doctor' and the brown hackle very killing," said Reynolds. "I have had rare sport in the smaller streams. The bass there are quite as game as brook trout."

"The mountain fish are like the mountain crackers: game but not over wise," Lapham quickly responded, with an intonation meant as a guaranty of the originality of his humor.

"Neither would be easily handled by a novice, I grant you," said Reynolds with a peculiar smile.

Lapham laughed merrily. The retort pleased him better than his own venture.

"I was up in the mountains last winter deer hunting," he said, "and there's one thing I can testify to in behalf of those crackers: they are very hospitable and obliging; they seem to think they can't do too much for one. But the women! It kept me in a state of chronic melancholy to see the poor things."

"Their life is a lonely, dreary, hopeless one," replied Reynolds, "but they are good, and as true as steel."

"Yes, no doubt they are good. I know they are kind, and all that. They asked me to smoke with them and called me sonny!"

"Did you go when they called you?" the General asked, with the ready familiarity of old acquaintance.

"Yes," said Lapham, "I recognize the fitness of the appellation."

Reynolds was thinking of Milly White. She was, in

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his mind, unseparable from any idea of the mountains and their people. He felt an impulse to resent, as personal to her, every suggestion made at the expense of the mountaineers. He could see her now, standing by the little gate gazing down the crooked, stony road, patiently watching for his return. He strove to brush aside the reflections that began to crowd into his brain, and with the help of Lapham's skipping levity and the unusual volubility of General DeKay's talk, he at last succeeded in hiding his uneasiness and lack of sympathy with the quiet merriment of the occasion.

Mrs. Ransom appeared to be lighter-hearted than at any other time since the adventure at the ruin. Her face was touched with a charming color and she followed Lapham's shallow chatter with smiling attention. It was from her that Reynolds finally caught the ability to forget himself and to fall into the spirit that ruled the rest of the company. Once engaged, he put forth his powers with good effect. For Lapham's benefit he described the Derby and the *Grand Prix*, a pigeon shoot in England where the stake was a thousand pounds, angling in Scotland and some hunting adventures in Algiers. From sport he easily drifted to art and from art into the ever wonderful and fascinating scenery of Switzerland and Italy. It was Agnes who led him on to speak of Paris and Rome, the two cities of every young woman's dream. She was full of the thought of going with him to the old

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world. It was intoxicating her. How far away it would be—that life beyond the sea—from the dreary, sorrowful pool of her narrow and bitter experience! That night in the quiet of her chamber she thought it all over, and she was dreaming of it when next morning the mocking-birds awoke her. Reynolds, too, went to his room with an almost light heart. From his window he saw Lapham, with a little sail set, go up the river before the night breeze, in the light of a crescent moon that hung over in the west.

"I will return to Birmingham to-morrow," he thought. He was in haste to get his affairs all arranged and then come back and persuade Agnes to name the earliest day possible for their marriage. He felt a mighty impatience, as if each moment endangered the cup of happiness now bubbling at his lips.

But the thought of going back to the mountains chilled him. Why need he go at all? Why should any sordid consideration enter into the discussion of his plans? Had he not already shut out of his life the dreamy hermitage and all that pertained to it? He tried to imagine a line drawn across the past at a point on this side of all his unprofitable experiences, a line over which he would teach his memory not to cross. Could he not, by a supreme effort of will, tear wholly away from his old self, as from a chrysalis sheath, purify himself and spend the rest of his days in the summer atmosphere of a calm and peaceful

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life? How it tormented him to perceive his lack of genuine courage and sincerity in this exacting crisis! He tried not to know that his new hopes and desires were not borne up by an underswell of true repentance. The selfishness of mere regret and remorse taunted him insidiously, whilst the happiness that beckoned him on was tricked in sensuous tinsel-tints, the exponents of a very low power of good. He struggled fiercely, silently, fighting down in detail the troops of phantoms that beset him. Finally he cheated himself into believing, or feigning to believe, that he had gained the victory. The field is clear, he thought, I am a man once more.

Strangely enough his mental struggle ended in confirming instead of rejecting the thought of returning to Birmingham at once and closing out his interests there. After all, why should he hesitate? What possible objection existed? How could he be affected? He brushed it all aside as sheer sentimentality unworthy of consideration. He could not assume to be responsible for every body who had chanced to come within the radius of his life. What is a man here for, save to forge his own way to happiness?

And so he rushed from one extreme to the other, wholly unable to see the fine straight line of right, wholly unwilling bravely to assume the responsibility of lifting the burden his own hands had packed and bound. Not see the right! Yes, he saw it at last,

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clearly enough he thought. Reparation, reparation. He would right all the wrongs he had done. He would do good all the rest of his life. Kindliness, charity, blessings. He would leave a trail of good deeds behind him wherever he should go. The poor should remember him and the afflicted should feel the touch of his tenderness. With Agnes beside him, with her pure soul to influence and encourage him, to what a height of unselfishness he might rise. He smiled and felt reassured. All was well.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

REALITIES.

THERE is no phase of life so steadfast and at the same time so tricksy and variable as what is called being in love: the current is all one way and yet its force appears to act in every direction. Love sets for itself impossible tasks with a perfect confidence, attempts any height, and, alas, too often is willing to delve in the mire and dregs of things with the hope of finding one glittering grain of its desire. No doubt supreme passion and supreme happiness lie far apart. Form, color, sound, perfume and whatever appeals through them, may constitute, we know not to what extent, the values of passion. Happiness is not so clothed that its substance is covered or its footing invisible. It appeals to the conscience more than to the senses. One may say: I am happy, and go delightedly through the giddy rounds of the little whirlwinds of pleasurable emotion, but he is all the time conscious of the vacuum and lack of equilibrium that have caused the unusual excitement. He is vaguely or otherwise mindful of the fact that he is indulging a delusion. His conscience argues that steadfastness, poise, evenness and certainty are the foundation stones

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of happiness. Too often these foundation stones seem to lie far away, so that, like the old poet, one cries out: "Oh, had I the wings of a dove!" Reynolds and Agnes had fixed their eyes on this distant place where, amid new scenes and strange people, the temple of their love might become the dwelling-place of immeasurable happiness. And why should they not realize this dream? They were young, strong and loving. He had wealth sufficient for a life of reasonable luxury, and was not their secret their own? Over and over again the argument was made and the pleasing conclusion reached.

It was a comfort to them both to reiterate their expressions of confidence in the future; for all the time there lurked a doubt somewhere on the outer boundary of their field of thought, a doubt each hoped the other did not know of. Not that either questioned the purity or perfectness of the other's love, that was impossible, but this dark secret of the past seemed to link them together on an insecure footing which might give way at any time, plunging them into an abyss of irremediable suffering. It mattered not how far away or how shadowy this doubt was, or how often it seemed to be utterly driven off, the lesion it caused to the tissue of their love-dreams was incurable and therefore dreadful, notwithstanding its obscurity. It might be forgotten for a time, even for a long time, but it could not be put away wholly and forever.

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However, love takes all risks, braves all dangers, attacks every obstacle. There was no longer hesitation, even if the doubt would linger. They were impatient to embark upon their voyage to love's land, as they imagined it, somewhere beyond the sea. They laughed, they sang, they exchanged sweet, airy utterances of passion, as did the birds in the green mazes of the tree-tops above them. They made the most of the moments.

"'Clar' ter goodness!" muttered Uncle Mono, whose eyes were not so old that he failed to note the wooing. "'Clar' ter goodness! Ef de young boss haint a rus'ler den I dunno nuffin'. W'y he done kotch de pore leetle missus, same lak er hawk ketch um bird. She not hab time ter squeak 'fore she gone! Mebbe it turn out de bes' kin', I dunno, but seem lak dar's somefin' 'sterious sorter bodderin' my min' 'bout it Wha' dat boss come f'om, anyhow? an' wha' he gwine ter go to, I'd lak ter know? But he's er rus'ler, sho's you bo'n, *he* is!"

General DeKay and his wife saw how matters were drifting, too, and they discussed the probable outcome with many doubts and misgivings. They were not persons fond of borrowing trouble, however, and they did not know of any objection to Reynolds. In fact, the General had grown to like him very much. Moreton had told them that Reynolds was wealthy and of a good family, and had let fall a great many apparently

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accidental references to his friend's good qualities. There seemed to be no foundation upon which to base an objection, no plausible reason for interference, so the love-passage was left to be worked out to its ending, whatever that might be.

Reynolds got ready to go to Birmingham. The DeKay place was about two hours' drive from Montgomery over a level country highway. So on the morning set for his departure a carriage stood ready at the gate in front of the lawn. He had taken formal leave of General DeKay early in the morning when that sport-loving planter was on the point of joining Lapham in an excursion for bass. The General had warmly urged him to return soon, so as to test the qualities of the fish in the Alabama, and he had readily accepted the invitation. Now he was lingering on the veranda with Agnes, who, dressed in a pale blue morning gown and flushed with the sweet emotions that filled her breast, was looking her loveliest. Her blue eyes had lost for the time all traces of the quiet sadness they had so long harbored, and were beaming with a tender, happy light. She stood up erect and strong, her slender figure, with its softly rounded outlines, poised with such grace as always suggests a reserve of abundant elasticity and youthful alertness. Whoever had studied her face at that time would have declared that its expression was in every way witchingly girlish, simply and charmingly beautiful, full of truth and earnest faith

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in the right; but he would not have called it an intellectual face, or one indexing a strongly developed character. She would make a good wife, he might have said, a trusting, gentle, ever-loving, ever-faithful companion, the comfort of a strong man, the sweet light of a home; but she could never be any thing more.

"A week, love, and then—" said Reynolds, pausing to look fondly down into her eyes.

"And then you will come back to me," she quickly replied, "I know you will, and I shall wait for you and think of you every minute of the time."

"Oh, you must not worry about me, or be impatient. The days will soon slip by. Take good care of yourself and——"

"You are the one who needs that advice," she urged, "for your wound is not entirely well, you know. Do be very, very careful, for, for—you are very dear to somebody now!"

He would have kissed her then, but Uncle Mono very unopportunely made his appearance around the corner of the veranda. Mono was old and wise. He knew that the departure of a guest from the house was the golden moment for a servant possessing his liberal opportunities. The lifting force of emancipation from slavery had not raised his pride above the level of those tricks which, in his days of bondage, had served to soothe his palm with pieces of silver, and even of

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gold sometimes, tossed from the lavish, careless hands of visitors whom he had waited upon. He came shambling along with his old hat in his hand, bowing very low and grinning the grin of the trickster who is sure that his trick must win. As he came near he said:

"Berry sorry yo' gwine away, boss, berry sorry. Hope yo' not fo'get ole Mono when yo' done gone. 'Cessful journey to yo', boss."

"Thank you, Uncle Mono, I can never forget you. Did you ever play base-ball, Mono?" said Reynolds.

"Nah, sah, do'n know nuffin' 'bout dat," answered the old man, shaking his head and executing some ludicrous grimaces. "I nebber plays nuffin' 'cep'n' de fiddle an' de banjer, an' I'se gettin' so ole an' 'flicted dat I can't play dem to no good. Old Mono mos' run he ye'thly co'se, boss."

"You're not springy and active, then, Mono. You've lost the use of yourself pretty nearly, I suppose?"

"Dat's it, boss, dat's it. Ole man all cripple up wid 'fliction an' ole age. No 'count any mo'. He done los' all he sperit."

"Well, Mono," said Reynolds very gravely, taking some pieces of money from his pocket, "if you'll catch this dollar when I throw it to you, I'll give you another."

Mono prepared to use his hat.

"No, no," exclaimed Reynolds, laughing, "I'll not

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have that! Put down your hat and use your hands. Now, here it comes."

No cat, leaping out of the summer grass to catch a low-flying sparrow, ever displayed more nimbleness and adroitness than did old Mono in catching that dollar. It fell upon his dusky palm with a clear slap and immediately found its way into his trowsers pocket.

"Yah, yah, yah! let de oder 'n come, boss, I's ready for 'm!" shouted the old fellow in great delight.

"You're an intolerable fraud, Mono," said Reynolds, tossing him another dollar, "your afflictions are of the kind the good people sing about, that 'are oft in mercy sent;' a few more of the same sort would make a famous acrobat of you."

"Fanky, boss, fanky; tole yo' dat yo' wus a rus'ler, did'n' I? Goo'by, boss, 'cessful journey to yo', sah."

"Good-by, Mono, we'll go a fishing when I come back," Reynolds called after him, as he rapidly retreated.

"All right, boss, I go wid yo'. I show yo' wha' dey is, sho's yo' bo'n. Goo'by!"

The morning breeze was singing in the vines that clothed the heavy columns of the tall veranda, and its gentle current tossed some loose tresses across Mrs. Ransom's happy face. It was time for Reynolds to be on his road, but he faltered whenever he undertook to say the word of parting. Yet a minute or two, he

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would think: I will make up for the lost time when I get started. She had never appeared so beautiful as now, never so happy, never so loving.

"Walk down to the gate with me," he presently said: "it will give me a happy send-off on my journey, to look back and see you standing there watching me as I am going out of sight among the shadows of the wood."

They spent a long time passing over the space between the veranda and the gate. Here they paused to dally beside a bed of hyacinth or there to note how wonderfully large the violets were. A touch of childishness, or thoughtlessness (or was it that artlessness which comes of complete self-forgetfulness?) made their actions amusingly interesting to Mrs. DeKay, who watched them from the window.

The colored driver was perched upon his high seat in front of the DeKay landau and the team of chestnut mares was ready for the road. There was plenty of time left in which to reach Montgomery so as to take the north bound train.

"Agnes," Reynolds murmured, "you must be ready to set an early day for our marriage by the time of my return. We shall want to sail as early in June as possible. I have not yet spoken to your uncle and aunt, but I shall as soon as I return."

She was silent, but it was a silence just as satisfactory to her lover as any words could have been.

The barbaric imagination, always a part of the negro,

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must have been aroused in the driver as he lounged in his seat and gazed at the beautiful woman and the tall, strong man straying down the walk. Their figures were boldly relieved against the dull gray background of the old house, and framed in with vines and magnolia boughs. He had a vivid though savagely crude sense of the warmth and tenderness and freshness of the picture. His indolent, half-closed eyes and shining, jet black face were expressive of that dreamy phase of delight which is generated by mere passive receptivity. The delicate blue of Mrs. Ransom's dress, the charming bloom of her face and the supple grace and strength of her slender figure were to him as a star is to a poet, a mystery, a focus of unapproachable glory, never to be any nearer or any further away. He felt, without knowing it, all the æsthetic values of the scene before him; the cloudless, tender sky, the rich green of the magnolias, the wind-beaten and rain-stained old mansion all wrapped in semi-tropical vines, the flare of the sunlight and the soft glooms of the shade, and, beyond the house and the trees, the sheeny reeds and the broad, winding river, all these with the fresh perfumes and delicious spring wind, touched him and

> "Passed like a glorious roll of drums
> Through the triumph of his dream."

He saw, he felt, he enjoyed—what more could his lazy, basking nature crave?

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The parting was commonplace enough, a mere clasping of hands, strong, hopeful smiles and good-by. It could not be less, it might outwardly have been more, if the driver had not been there.

"You will come soon."

"Very soon—in a few days."

The carriage, a sort of open landau, began to move, and Reynolds sitting in the rear turned and furtively flung back a kiss.

She was already beginning to grow pale, but she touched her lips with her fingers and waved him adieu with a bright smile.

He kept his eyes upon her, as the distance gradually grew, and, so absorbed was he, it startled him when the vehicle suddenly came to a stand-still.

"Wha' do Gin'l DeKay lib?" called out the driver of a carriage whose way lay opposite to theirs.

"Jis back ya' leetle ways," answered Reynolds' driver.

"All right, I fought so; much 'bleeged."

Both carriages moved again. In passing Reynolds saw a slender, picturesque looking man, whose yellowish hair fell in profuse curls about his neck and shoulders. He wore a broad-brimmed, light colored hat and a close-fitting semi-military suit of gray.

It was a most irritating thing that this man and his vehicle should whisk into the line of Reynolds' vision and entirely hide Agnes from him. He craned his

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neck and tried to look over or past that wide slouch hat and those slender, curl-covered shoulders, but it was impossible.

"Damn the fellow!" he muttered. "Stop a moment, Dan," he called to the driver.

The mares were drawn up and the carriage came to a stand-still in a moment. Reynolds waited impatiently, hoping that some slight swerve in the road would give him one more glimpse of the blue dress and shining face. He felt that he could not thus abruptly and unauspiciously lose sight of her. But the road was straight and the vehicle kept well in the middle of it until it neared the gate of DeKay Place, where it turned and stopped.

Mrs. Ransom was there, with her face toward him. He snatched out his handkerchief and waved it rapidly to and fro, but before he could get any response from her, the young man had got out of his carriage and placed himself in front of her, so that she was completely eclipsed.

Reynolds uttered some phrase expressive of bitter disappointment. His driver turned a surreptitious look of wonder and inquiry upon him, but dared not speak when he saw that Reynolds was looking at what was going on at the gate. Naturally enough the negro shrewdly suspected that here was a little play of rivalry between two gentlemen, and that he had better not interfere.

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As Reynolds leaned over the back of the seat and looked, there was a sudden movement made by the stranger that for a moment left Agnes in plain view, and he saw her throw up both hands and heard her cry out. Then the man clasped her and held her in his arms. Something in this scene startled Reynolds strangely, he hardly knew why, and he hurriedly commanded the driver to drive back to the gate.

"Quick, Dan, make the horses go; hurry, I say!" he added in a voice rough with excitement. There was a cold feeling in his breast, as if a damp, chilling breath had blown through it, and a heavy weight seemed pressing on his brain.

In less than a minute the gate was reached and Reynolds had leaped to the ground. The man had let Mrs. Ransom go, and the two were standing facing each other. Both looked excited. She was very pale, but showed no sign of weakness, holding herself erect and steady. She turned her eyes upon Reynolds, as he came near, and made a movement with her lips, as if speaking, without emitting any sound. The man, who appeared to be an invalid, trembled a little and did not take his eyes off her face, even for an instant, but gazed at her with such yearning in his expression as would have touched the coldest observer. He had taken off his sombrero, holding it in his hand, and the light wind was tossing his long ringlets about his neck and cheeks. There was that peculiar droop to one of

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his shoulders, together with a hollowness of his chest on that side, which indicated that at some time in his life he had been desperately wounded.

"Agnes, Agnes, what is the matter?" Reynolds exclaimed in that startled, rasping voice which is common to all men when confronted by an overwhelming trouble. He asked this question involuntarily, aimlessly, for he well understood what all this quiet, terrible scene was about. He knew this man now. It was hard to comprehend how such a thing could be; but this was Ransom standing here, Ransom alive and confronting his wife. Agnes made two or three fruitless efforts before she was able to exclaim:

"Oh, John—Mr. Reynolds, go away! Go away! This is—this is my husband!" She did not say this demonstratively or noisily—her voice was low and quite calm, save that she seemed to falter a little. "Oh, I have always thought you were not dead and that you would come back!" she added, turning toward the man with something like a shudder in her tones.

"Ransom, is this indeed you?" demanded Reynolds, gathering enough force to crush down his bewilderment.

The man turned his eyes upon his interrogator for a second. His stare had in it a mingling of surprise and insolent bravado. Then with a slight start he ejaculated:

"Reynolds!"

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Mrs. Ransom clasped her hands and looked helplessly and beseechingly from one to the other. Her lips quivered pitifully.

The two men stared at each other as if unwilling to accept the situation and yet unable to escape it. Each seemed waiting for the other to explain why he was there. It did not once occur to Reynolds that this man had the legal right to Agnes, and that henceforth she must be as lost as if dead. He went no further than to recognize that here was a mystery and a trouble. The catastrophe had been so peculiar and sudden, so lacking in those melodramatic features common to such scenes, that it had a dulling, numbing effect upon his faculties. Ransom was not so bewildered. It surprised him to see Reynolds and it displeased him as well, but he had prepared himself, before coming, for any kind of a scene with his wife; therefore, although excited, he was quite deliberate after the first little start of recognition had spent its force.

"I was not expecting to see *you*," he said with peculiar emphasis. "Nor you me, I suppose."

The man's whole manner was sinister and crafty, and yet, at the same time, there was something subdued, something suggestive of long suffering and unmerited injury, in the expression of his face and the attitude of his person. He appeared to Reynolds' startled and distorted vision an incarnate accusation.

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The situation might have had a touch of the supernatural in it, if its realism had not been so peculiarly pronounced and unmistakable. The whole affair was a cold, dull, immitigable affair. It did not even rise to the level of romance. It had come as death comes, a stark, overpowering, repulsive result of perfectly inexplicable causes, bearing down before it every thought of resistance or escape.

Reynolds had ready no response. The predicament was one which seemed to him malign in its whole bearing, with no room for words of inquiry or of explanation. A sense of suffocation assailed him, as if all those dreams and hopes and delightful anticipations that he had been so luxuriating in lately, had fallen dead in a wilted heap upon his heart.

Ransom was a strangely handsome man, with a dash of devil-may-care blended with melancholy in his face. His features were clearly and finely cut, delicate but not effeminate, showing strong traces of suffering, with something of that cool nervousness (if one may so express it) in their play, so often noticed in the faces of gamblers and outlaws. He was rather above the medium stature, well-knit and graceful, erect (saving that slight peculiar droop of one shoulder), alert and well-poised. He turned from Reynolds to Agnes and with the utmost tenderness said:

"Come, little wife, I've a long story to tell you—a strange story. I have not been so bad as you think. I

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have been just the same as dead, four years in a Mexican prison."

It was not what he said but the way in which he said it, that made his appeal so very affecting. Reynolds felt a vague thrill of pity. At the same time there came upon him the first shock of genuine realization of the situation. The phrase "little wife," as used by Ransom, enforced its deep significance at once. It struck with a directness that gave no chance for evasion.

"Oh, Herbert, Herbert!" cried Agnes, suddenly making a step forward and casting her arms around Ransom's neck. "Oh, is it really, really you!"

The lithe little figure in its rustling blue gown shrank close to him and quivered in his embrace. He bent his head and kissed her again and again, his long bright curls falling across her upturned face.

Reynolds recoiled as if he had received a blow, then, steadying himself, he looked upon them as one might look into one's own grave. Ransom's voice, murmuring all manner of caressing phrases, was infinitely musical and sweet, but there was that in it which betrayed a weakness not wholly physical, a suggestion of irresponsibility and insincerity.

It may have been the effect of long imprisonment, the nature of his wound and protracted mental worry, or it may have been altogether owing to the interpretation he had instantly given to the relationship

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between Agnes and Reynolds; but from whatever cause, his face was luminous with a pale glow expressive of the most pathetic misery blended with exultation.

Reynolds stood like a bronze statue, his eyes burning with a dull fire and his face seamed and shriveled.

Ransom clung to his wife, stroking her hair and kissing her cheek. His ecstasy was genuine, but it lacked the force of lofty passion.

Presently Agnes freed herself from his embrace, quite as suddenly as she had sought it, as if some revulsion of feeling or some strong conviction of the impropriety of such extreme action had mastered her. She looked at Reynolds, and meeting his gloomy, despairing gaze, let fall her eyes, a quick blush covering her cheeks. In that moment all the force of her surroundings rushed furiously upon her. The blush gave place to a deadly paleness that appeared to affect her face as a white heat. She put up one hand quickly, as if to touch her forehead, but lowered it again, staggered and fell. Both men sprang to her assistance. Reynolds brushed the other aside, as he might have brushed aside some insect. Then lifting Agnes in his arms he bore her to the house. He did this in a mood that eliminated from his thought, for the time, all else save the woman he loved. He carried her without at all feeling her weight, and his movement was so swift that Ransom did not try to keep pace

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with him; but followed him with slow, feeble steps into the hall and thence into the parlor. But it had not been a swoon, only a mere vanishing from her of strength sufficient to stand. She raised herself to a sitting posture, so soon as Reynolds put her on a sofa, and looked at him with an immediate understanding of what had happened. Ransom had not yet come in.

"Where is he—Herbert, my husband—where is he?" she asked.

"Oh, Agnes! Agnes!" cried Reynolds, taking her again in his arms. "It can not be so! you can not, you will not, you shall not give me up for him!"

She sprang away from him and stood up pale and firm before him.

"Do not touch me again," she exclaimed, in a way that sent the blood in upon his heart. "You have no right. He is my husband. You said he was dead. You said—you—you deceived me—told me a falsehood —you—"

"For heaven's sake, Agnes, hold—don't say that! I told you true. I thought he was dead—I thought I killed him—I did not dream of his being alive!"

Ransom was standing by now glancing keenly from one to the other. When he spoke it was directly to Reynolds.

"If my wife wishes to talk longer with you, well and good, sir, but if not, you must see the propriety of leaving her to me." His manner was suave, but there

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was a mighty meaning in his voice and a steely glitter in his eyes.

"Leave her to *you*!" said Reynolds in a white heat of fury, "never!"

"You *must* leave me, and at *once*," said Agnes firmly.

He looked into her eyes as if trying to read the lowest lines of their meaning, but he found nothing to aid him. The love-light had faded and in its stead the cold beam of loveless duty shone out clear and strong. He saw that she was as hopelessly gone from him as if she lay dead in her grave. He stretched out his arms toward her, but quickly withdrew them, not, however, on account of a swift, facile movement of Ransom's hand to the place where a pistol is usually concealed by a man who carries one, for he did not see it, but because her eyes repelled him. There was nothing for him to do but to go away forever. He rushed from the room and from the house. Half way to the gate he stopped and turned about, fixing upon the weather-stained old building a gaze that it would have been awful to contemplate, so intense, so wild, so malignant. His hands were clenched, his lips, so compressed that they seemed welded, were cold and purple. For a mere point of time he was a murderer; but, despite the intervening wall of the house, he could see Agnes clinging to her husband and the mood was flung aside. Her husband! What right had he to

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survive that well-aimed shot? What right had he to escape from a Mexican prison and drag his wrecked body and withered soul back here to crush out such a love as that which but an hour ago had lighted up the whole world?

It was but a flash of desperate passion, that came and went in an instant, leaving Reynolds all the more helplessly bewildered. What could he do? He stood there rigid, breathless, choking in the impotence of utter irresolution.

Again he turned towards the carriage. Far and near in the tender foliage of the trees the mocking birds sang with lusty fervor. The sweet South breathed upon him the warm, odorous breath of love's own clime.

Dan the driver, from his seat on the carriage, had watched this melodramatic scene from first to last, so far at least as it was not shut out from his vision, with all the open-mouthed wonder characteristic of a negro under such circumstances. He well knew that the predicament was one of no ordinary sort, and that weighty interests were involved. He had expected every moment to see knives or pistols gleam and flash, but he had been so dazed and scared that he could not have moved to save his life. He sat there gripping the lines and leaning forward in an attitude of painful rigidity, his shoulders elevated and his chin thrust out, lost to every thing but the excitement that had taken possession of him.

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Uncle Mono, in blissful ignorance of the drama, was down in the little plat of ground devoted to his melon vines, stirring the sandy loam with a hoe and singing a lively camp-meeting song. The two silver dollars given to him by Reynolds had made him very happy indeed.

Reynolds took no note of any thing around him. The sunshine, the bird-songs, the voice of the merry old freedman and the dying rustle of the now almost motionless air did not reach his senses. Again and again he stopped as if to rush back, his arms twitching, his face rigid, but all the time he was half aware that fate was binding him more firmly each moment. Already the sweet life of the past month had receded into the far, hazy distance, as if its sphere had whirled away to the remotest region of space, almost beyond the reach of his vision, and with it all the best of his nature, leaving him groveling and baffled, a clod on a barren field.

"Drive me to Montgomery as fast as you can go, Dan," he said to the driver as he reached the gate and entered the landau.

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CHAPTER XIX.

WHITHER?

"DRIVE fast, Dan, I am in a great hurry," said Reynolds, as the mares again moved gently along the road in the direction of Montgomery.

The negro waved his whip above the backs of the spirited animals, starting them into a rapid trot. The wheels made little noise on the light sandy surface over which they whirled. Reynolds sat bolt upright, looking neither to the right nor to the left, his vision introverted. He was calm as marble, so far as outward appearance went, and inwardly there was no commotion, but a cold, dull, smothering sense of defeat and despair.

The woods on either side of the road were dull and soundless, save that, where the tall clumps of pines shot above the rest of the trees, their tops let fall a mellow roar which the slightest breeze has power to awaken in their frondous meshes.

The negro presently began to sing, in a strangely melodious undertone, an old, old Alabama ditty:

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"Oh, poor Lucy Neal,
Oh, poor Lucy Neal,
And if I had you by my side,
How happy I would feel!"

Reynolds started, clenched his hands and began to breathe hard.

"Dan," he cried, "drive back, drive back, I can't bear it!"

Dan pulled up the mares and turned round in his seat:

"What yo' say, boss?" he inquired, touching his hat and but half repressing his surprise.

"Turn round and drive back. Be quick, make them go: do you hear?"

"Yah, sah," answered Dan. A flush had sprung into Reynolds' cheeks in response to his sudden resolve. How could he ever have thought of abandoning her in this cowardly way? She is mine, he thought, she loves me, he has no right to her now: I will go back and claim my own with a force that shall be irresistible.

"Drive faster, Dan, do you hear, drive faster!"

"Yah, sah, boss."

The mares put themselves forth to their utmost, gladly reaching back toward home. For a minute or two Reynolds was wholly in the power of this new mood. But it passed as suddenly as it had come, and again, with redoubled weight, the load of despair returned.

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"Hold up, Dan, hold up!"

"Yah, sah." Dan once more brought the equipage to a standstill.

Flickering expressions of hesitancy, faltering and giving up of hope, played for a brief space of time on Reynolds' face, before he could say:

"Turn again: drive to Montgomery."

"By jiffs!" muttered Dan, *sotto voce*, "is de boss done gone 'stracted?"

He obeyed the order, however, not caring to risk the consequences of any open symptoms of disapproval. He was well aware that a storm was pent up in Reynolds' bosom, and he dreaded lest the slightest slip should turn its blasts and buffets loose upon him.

"Faster, can't you, Dan?" urged the heavy rasping voice behind him, and the half-frightened negro touched the spirited team with the whip. Away they flew, at what horsemen call a three-minute pace, flashing through the spaces of sunshine and sweeping over the long stretches of shade, until the open country was again reached, where, between straggling worm fences, the road cut across vast fertile plantations.

At length in the distance, crowning a swell of billowy, irregular land, Montgomery appeared, with its clay-red streets slanting up between long lines of gnarled trees and its house-roofs and church-spires struggling through the greenery of vines and orchards, and the gloom of old dusky groves. On the highest point the grayish

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white, rectangular capitol, with its heavy columns and diminutive windows, gleamed bare and almost barn-like, in contrast with the embowered and picturesque residences surrounding it.

Just before they entered a street of the city, they met Beresford and another gentleman going toward the country in an open road wagon. They had their guns and dogs. Beresford bowed and lifted his hat. Reynolds returned the salute, rather from force of habit than from any real notice given to the courtesy, but the incident took his thoughts back past the drear defeat of to-day, to the sweet victory of that short period now glimmering as if on the uttermost horizon of memory.

"Drive directly to the railroad depot, Dan," he said, and all the way through the city he sat calmly erect, like some thoughtful professional man going to his office.

It was some time past noon when they reached the station and there was no train until after nightfall.

Reynolds gave Dan a liberal reward in money.

"Good-by, Dan," he said, "don't drive the mares so fast going back: they appear tired."

"Pow'ful hard on 'em, boss, a rushin' 'em dis way an' dat way an' a makin' 'em go der bes' licks all de way, up hill an' down. By jiffs, but I's erfeared dey'd drap afo' dey got yer, boss!"

Reynolds turned away and began walking back and

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forth on the station platform. A beautiful reach of the Alabama river lay in full view, under high bluffs of chocolate-colored clay, and the breeze came over the water sweet and cool.

Dan mounted to his seat and prepared to drive up into the city, where he intended to get something to eat for himself and horses.

"Hold a moment," called Reynolds, taking a pencil and a small memorandum-book from his pocket, "wait till I write a few words." He began rapidly writing, then stopped and tore up the leaf, looked aimlessly about for a time and turned abruptly off, saying in a strangely dry voice:

"Never mind: good-by, Dan."

The carriage rolled away, the sound of its wheels on the street coming back to his ears in gradually diminishing clacks, reminding him that the last fragile link that had connected him with the old plantation was broken. He walked across the railroad tracks and sat down on a breezy point of the bluff overhanging the river. There was something in the river, there was something in the wind, the water, the sky and the wide horizon that cooled the fever in his blood for the time and set his brain to work with less confusion. His long years of hermit life had developed in him the habit of self-communion to such an extent that it required solitude to reduce his distracted faculties to something near their normal relations. We who view from the mere

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artist's standpoint the operations of those influences that control the destinies of men, sometimes see a hideous stroke of humor in the doings of fate. Tragedy and comedy lie so close to each other, that a mere change of intonation in the reading of a line may determine the difference between them. So, in reality, what under one light is incomparably tragic may, under another, appear trivial and almost comic. Beresford's failure with Agnes Ransom, though just as final and conclusive, seems a small thing beside the overwhelming disaster that fell upon Reynolds in the same field, and yet one might say: failure can go no further than failure: Beresford lost all,—how could Reynolds lose more? Is it really a more hopeless and tragic thing to love and be loved and lose than to love and not be loved and lose? Was it the difference between the men, or the circumstances, that enabled Beresford to take pleasure in a friend, his dogs and his gun, whilst Reynolds sat dreary-hearted, wretched, unconsolable, with folded hands and bowed head, alone by the river? This set of questions may not be solved by any artistic analysis. The solution is in the bold impression of the facts caught at a glance by every one who has any considerable reach of human sympathy.

When at last Reynolds grew calm enough to examine the situation somewhat in the light of cold reason, he saw that Agnes, not himself, must bear the heaviest load of any one connected therewith. He knew that

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she loved him and that, loving him, she would devote the rest of her life to one whom she could not love, but to whom the laws of man and of duty, and every dictate of a pure conscience, bound her. Viewing it thus, his life seemed to end in a *cul-de-sac*. It had been a barren life, for the most part, so far, even worse than barren; it had been evil in no small degree. Conscience leaped upon him and shook him as a wild beast shakes and worries its prey. He felt its fangs and welcomed the agony they inflicted, as a relief from the terrible numbness that had taken possession of him and beside which any pain was pleasure.

It was almost dark when he went back to the station and entered the little waiting-room, where Dan had deposited his traveling-bag, and sat down on a bench to wait for the train. Several persons were there, impatient to be going, as travelers by rail usually are, but Reynolds was not in sympathy with their mood. He felt no concern about the train, whether ten minutes or ten hours late. Why should he not be just as content while waiting for a train as while doing any thing else? What more interest was it to him to be going than it was to be staying? The thought of the cabin and its household, of White's oddities and humorous absurdities, and of Milly's faithful patience and plebeian sweetness and sincerity, did not draw him: in fact it repelled him. Why go back there at all? Why not go to England and join Moreton, or to Egypt

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and engage with Doctor Blank (another friend of his) in his scientific explorations? Then again came conscience, with waving mane and flaming eyes, roaring and baring its fangs. He could see no promise of escape from the torment. But why should he struggle? He got up and walked to and fro, as did the other restless waiters for the train. Strange what tricks the brain plays under every sort of strain and torture. The turmoil of his thoughts, like some tempest-tumbled sea, kept tossing lightly on its surface as the sea might have tossed a cork, those simple rhymes about

> "The light of her eyes
> And the dew of her lips,
> Where the moth never flies
> And the bee never sips."

He could not help it, any more than he could calm the awful underswell of despair. He was far from feeling any presence of good in all this agony. No sense of a coming purification, as a result of the heat to which his soul was subjected. That his nature was giving way before the intense blast of the furnace, he may have known, but he had no thought of any separation of the little gold of good from the mass of evil. How could he ever again think of trying to do good? What a life of heavenly happiness he had just missed! He clung desperately to the sensuous picture his memory kept before him, reveling in the torture it generated.

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No thought of the future entered his mind, unless the form of poor little Milly, which now and again appeared to him, might be called a thought. From the outlines of her supple figure and haunting face he shrank with an inward shudder. Then suddenly, by some obscure cerebral operation, a glimpse, momentary but thrillingly sharp and clear, disclosed to him that other extreme of his situation. What a vast arc between the two confines of oscillation! Agnes Ransom, Milly White! Now, at last, he felt himself shriveling and wasting in the fire, as the blast from the tuyeres of God's furnace was doubled and trebled. He began to imagine how it all was to end, while some strange, thrilling whisper suggested the outlines of duty. Duty! what did he care for duty! Why should he, whose sweetest hopes had been dissipated by this breath of providence, have any care for the happiness of others? But his rebellion was weak. He arose, as the cars came crashing up to the station, and prepared himself for he knew not what. Almost any thing would be welcome. There seemed to be no place for him save the barren, dreary cabin in the mountains. As he realized this, once more his old arrogant nature flared up. "I will not go there," he thought, and his cheeks flushed. "I will not be the dupe of circumstance. I will go to the ends of the earth first." Nevertheless, he went aboard the train and took his seat in a car which was well filled with

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happy tourists returning to their Northern homes. The first person upon whom his eyes chanced to fall was Miss Crabb. She was busy with her note-book and pencil, her chin drawn down and her brow contracted with intense thought. He shrank from her, as from something unbearable, and forthwith slipped away into another car.

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CHAPTER XX.

AFTER ALL.

WHITE'S cabin was better than the average Sand-Mountain house, but its surroundings were not so inviting as those where considerable farms, with orchards and garden plats, gave an air of frugal thrift, almost of comfort to the scene, at some points in the lower valleys. It was built of pine logs, split into halves, the flat side turned in, and the apertures between covered with long clap-boards of pine, rove with the grain, and smoothed with a drawing-knife. The chimneys, which were spacious, consisted of pens of split sticks, built from the ground to a little above the roof, and heavily daubed with red clay. An arid little clearing whose stumpy, rain-washed fields lay as if on edge, leaning against the mountain-side, showed that a light crop of tobacco or a doubtful yield of maize "nubbins" would be the best return that labor might hope for from the soilless clay and the dry, lifeless monotony of the mountain summers. This clearing was all on one side of the cabin, reaching down toward the little valley, whilst on the other three sides the forest was unbroken, saving that, further up the

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mountain, wind and fire had done their work for ages. The fences about the place were old and neglected, grown over by vines and shrubs of various kinds, and the little gate in front, made of wattled boards, hung askew on rude hinges of hickory withes. Just outside of this gate, between it and the road, was a small space which for many years, ever since the cabin was built, in fact, had been used for piling up, cutting and splitting the wood and pine knots used by the household, and upon which a moldy mass of chips, bark and woody fragments had slowly accumulated. All the native trees near the cabin had long ago been felled, and a few gnarled peach trees now grew in their stead. Standing on the rotten door-sill and looking out across the lower valley, one could have a fine view, over ill-shaped farm-plats and variegated woods, of the broken masses of mountains, near and far, with their beetling cliffs, their clustered foot-hills and their bare stony peaks, all over-canopied with a serene blue sky. But the scene was not one to inspire the beholder with any broad ideas of nature or of human life. It was a dry, cramped, desolate landscape, even in the first fresh colors of spring, when the tassels were on the trees and the wild flowers fairly carpeted the ground, for it lacked fertility, suggestion, promise.

Here Milly White had been born and here she had lived to grow from babyhood to womanhood, a wild growth, like that of the native trees, plants and birds,

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Physically she was beautiful to look upon, if in looking one could separate the physical from the other form of human beauty; but she was strictly a product of Sand Mountain, the last refinement of its productive forces, no doubt, approaching as near the perfect as nature, working within such limitations and under such hopeless restrictions, could get. It would be impossible to give in words any fair idea of her beauty or of her ignorance; to attempt either would appear like exaggeration. The painter would succeed no better, for his representation could reach no further than pathetic caricature. Her life, her condition and her surroundings composed an instance not far out of the common in Sand Mountain existence. Her beauty, it is true, was exceptional, as beauty is in all cases, her ignorance was somewhat denser than the average, and her experience on Reynolds' account, had compassed its utmost possibility of disturbing force. In so far as her vision could go, she peered into the paradise coveted by all girls, and dreamed the dreams of unselfish love. Every evening she went down to the little gate and leaned upon it, watching long and patiently for the coming of a man, as other women do, and every morning she renewed the vigil for a time, and the evening and the morning were a day. She had but a vague understanding of things too vaguely understood by all girls, and she made of Reynolds no more a god than most young women do of the men they

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love. She could not realize her danger and she felt but indefinitely how much she was risking. As days and weeks dragged by and John did not come, she showed signs of nervous restlessness; but she said little. Her health, instead of failing, as might have been expected, seemed to improve. Her face filled out to full womanly proportions, her cheeks gathering rich tints of rose and carmine, her eyes softening and dilating as if with the wonder of some sweet, strange discovery. She hovered, as a butterfly about a flower, over the things in Reynolds' room. For hours she would sit before the sketch on the easel and gaze dreamily, half forlornly at it. She arranged and re-arranged the books, the chairs, the little worn foot-stool, the slippers, the dressing-gown, creeping about as noiselessly as if she feared the least sound might break her reverie. She was lonely, despondent and nervous at times, but she did not complain. White exhausted over and over again his stock of ingenuity in inventing excuses for "thet ther Colonel," who, he insisted, was "a hevin' of sech a roarin' ole time, a shootin' of birds an' a drinkin' of liquor an' a playin' of them ther new-fangled games of keerds." White himself had grown strangely uneasy in his manner and his eyes had lost somewhat of their humorous light. It was beginning to confirm itself in his mind that his idol had clay feet. He gave up his confidence in Reynolds inch by inch, so to speak, clinging to it with the dogged stubbornness of his narrow nature.

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Spring fell upon the mountains some weeks earlier than usual. The old peach-trees were loaded with pale pink bloom and along the ragged ravines a tender green ran in waving veins. Day after day was cloudless and warm, followed by nights of such starry splendor as are seen nowhere save in the Southern mountain regions.

One evening Milly was at the gate, as usual, leaning over its uneven slats, gazing down the stony road. Her father came out of the cabin, bare-headed, pipe in mouth, with his hands thrust into his trowsers pockets.

"Think he air a comin' to-night, do ye, Milly?" he asked, standing near her and looking aimlessly about. "I shedn't be s'prised ef he'd drop along one of these yer days purty soon. Hit air a gittin' most time for the bird-shootin' ter stop, anyhow."

"I dremp las' night 'at he wer' dead, an' 'at's a sign, ye know," she answered, without looking up. "I jes' know 'at he air a comin' purty soon."

"Ef ye do see 'im a comin' down the road ther', Milly, an' ye've a min' ter jump over thet gate ther', w'y I shed 'vise ye ter git back yer a leetle an' take a runnin' start so's to be shore not to trip er nothin'." White chuckled dryly at the end of his speech, as if enjoying the scene it suggested; but receiving no reply from the girl his face resumed its look of stolid repose, albeit his eyes wandered restlessly without seeming to see any thing.

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The sun was down, an hour ago, and the stillness of night had fallen on the wide, rugged landscape. There was scarcely wind enough to bear away the light jets of tobacco smoke puffed sharply now and then from the man's mouth.

"I dremp las' night, too, 'at the Colonel he wer' dead, Milly," he presently said; but he did not add that he dreamed that the Colonel had been killed, and by his hand.

"I'm jest a lookin' for 'im now, an' a 'spectin' 'im ever' minute," she replied, her voice quavering sweetly, her limbs trembling.

White swallowed, as if something hurt his throat, and pressed a finger vigorously into his pipe. The muscles of his face twitched convulsively.

"Oh, I consider 'at we'd better go inter the house, Milly," he urged, "for hit air not 'tall s'posible 'at the Colonel he 'll come to-night; but he air comin' shore ter-morrer, that's es sarting es gun's iron, Milly."

"Lis'n, pap, I yer somethin' like he wer' a walkin' up the road this yer way: lis'n!" She shook her hand at him in token of silence, but did not turn her head, leaning far over the gate.

"Hit ain't him, Milly, he'd be er singin' er song, ef hit wer' him. Don't ye 'member how he used ter warble them cur'us chunes when he wer' a comin'?"

"Keep still, I tell ye, pap, for I know 'at I jest *do* yer 'im a comin' down ther'."

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"Mebbe ye do, s'pec ye do," said White with a shake of his head, "but hit air ter-morrer 'at ye yer 'im a comin'. He air dead shore to roll in ter-morrer. Don't ye fret, he air a comin' 'fore long, Milly."

"He air a comin' right now: oh!" she cried, and flinging open the gate, she slipped through like a bird and ran down the road.

"I knowed 'at ye'd come, John, oh, John! John!" White heard her say, her voice cutting with shrill sweetness through the still evening air.

He went through the gateway, and, stumbling over the wood-pile, walked rapidly after her. Sure enough, there was Reynolds in the middle of the road, with Milly clinging to him. They were in a place where the strong star-light dimly outlined them. White stopped short and actually reeled like a drunken man. He went no nearer to them, but turned and staggered rather than walked back into the cabin.

"Hit air all right, mother," he said to his wife as he entered. "He air out ther'—the Colonel air."

She looked up with a start, for his voice was thick with excitement.

"She—she—Milly 'll be all right now. She won't go erstracted now, mother," he added, dropping into a chair and beginning to refill his pipe.

THE END.

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